

the little children raise their open filthy palms

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by [thanotaphobia \(blue000jay\)](#)

Summary

Phil doesn't go into the cities anymore. Once had been enough, and he doesn't have a death wish.

He chooses only to watch them in the distance, or pass by them from time to time as he walks. The buildings loom in the distance, their once-shining rooftops now overgrown and dull with no one to take care of them. If you get close enough, you smell the stench of rot and death. It's a smell you can never get out of your nose, discovered one night after the initial wave where Phil tried desperately to scrub out his nose, sticking cloth and then even fingers as far up as he could to try and wash the smell out of his sinuses. It didn't work, and the smell has stayed with him since. He tries to look past it, look past the cities, and continue walking forward. That's what he attributes his survival to, really. The ability to look past everything, stare the dead in the eyes, and still walk on after he's shot them in the head. They were people once, but thinking about it too much makes his hands start to shake so Phil looks past it and walks on.

(SBI zombie apocalypse AU. sort of phil-centric, but not entirely!)

Notes

hi!! thanks for taking the time to read this. i'll be explicit in saying there's no shipping, and that if creators express discomfort it will be taken down.

my [twitter!](#)

Chapter 1

The apocalypse had hit hard and quick, like a landslide.

Phil's been around the world a few times. He's seen some shit- seen devastation and poverty and destruction more than once. All of it (and he means all of it) couldn't hold a candle to the state of the world as it stands now. Houses abandoned, dead roaming the streets, cities in shambles.

Phil doesn't go into the cities anymore. Once had been enough, and he doesn't have a death wish.

He chooses only to watch them in the distance, or pass by them from time to time as he walks. The buildings loom in the distance, their once-shining rooftops now overgrown and dull with no one to take care of them. If you get close enough, you smell the stench of rot and death. It's a smell you can never get out of your nose, discovered one night after the initial wave where Phil tried desperately to scrub out his nose, sticking cloth and then even fingers as far up as he could to try and wash the smell out of his sinuses. It didn't work, and the smell has stayed with him since. He tries to look past it, look past the cities, and continue walking forward. That's what he attributes his survival to, really. The ability to look past everything, stare the dead in the eyes, and still walk on after he's shot them in the head. They *were* people once, but thinking about it too much makes his hands start to shake so Phil looks past it and walks on.

He's not really sure where he is, which is why he's exposed himself now. Roads are usually dangerous and not worth the time, most of the cars too wrecked or grown-over to be able to drive. Finding gas is another problem altogether, and they're loud. It's really not worth it. But road signs are like maps and indicators of where the hell he is, so he shoves down the nervous feeling in his gut and steps out onto the cracked asphalt. The paint is faded below his feet as he follows the white line, glancing up and around to try and find a sign quickly. There's one up ahead, pale blue against the green of the trees he'd come from, so he heads that way. He gets just close enough to make out the words that have faded a bit and been graffitied over- *Streatley, Luton, a little too close to London for comfort* - when there's a shout from behind him and then the sound of some sort of weapon firing.

Phil drops. It wasn't a gunshot, but there's another *twang* of string and wood and if he didn't know any better, he would say compound bow just from sound alone. He's on the ground, knelt against the hot shell of some car, pushing his back and pack up against the metal as he scans the area around him for the source of the sound. There's more noise- the groan of the dead and another shout. No, a whoop. Whoever it is, it sounds almost like they're having fun. Another voice joins in, too loud for Phil's personal preference, and a dull thump as projectile meets flesh. The whoops turn celebratory, so he risks a peek above the metal and broken glass. Almost instantaneously, like it was drawn by the sounds of stupid people, one of the deadwalkers sits up from its hibernation spot right in front of him.

He scrambles backwards, hands reaching and gripping his shotgun without hesitation. It slips off his shoulder and into his hands and he fires, the bang echoing across the street. Voices cut off and suddenly there's two shapes popping up from behind the cars, and more clicking sounds. *Of course* that woke up whatever other hibernating monsters were around, sleeping in the cars to avoid the sun and elements as they waited for people to infect. There's motion in the corner of his eye, and Phil swings around, taking down another deadwalker before it can crawl out of the car it had been hiding in.

"Shit!" One of the voices, the louder one he'd heard first, now sounds panicked and rushed. Before he can react, the two shapes from before are barreling his way. It's only due to the fact that he's out of shells that he doesn't immediately shoot at them, fingers moving to reload his gun as he steps backwards towards the treeline.

The two shapes moving toward him- very alive, very much alive- seem to be children.

The taller of the two, and blond, is holding a crossbow in his hands and reloading it as he goes. The smaller brunet has an axe across his back, dirt smeared across his face as he hops over the hood of a car and blinks in surprise at Phil's presence.

"Go go go go go!" The taller one shouts, and Phil doesn't hesitate to agree. Go go go, away from the road and the ominous clicking sounds that often come before a near-death situation. The two boys blast past him and into the trees, and Phil is hot on their heels without a second thought. The treeline is close and they make it in seconds, pushing into the brush and ignoring the string of small branches on his cheeks as he runs. He keeps the two boys in his line of sight as he goes, the crunching of their feet and breathing being the only noises now. And the clicking. There's an unearthly scream from behind him and slightly to the right, so Phil reaches out with one hand and grabs a young tree, readies his rifle against his hip, then uses his momentum to swing around and fire. The deadwalker jolts, arm flying back as a spatter of rot and congealed blood flies from it, but it doesn't slow. Phil fires again, this time with better aim, and it goes down. He turns and keeps running, heart pounding in his chest along in time with the thud of his feet against the forest floor.

They don't slow down for a while. Both boys are ahead of him and Phil can't seem to catch up, keeping his eyes ahead and ears behind as he listens for any monster that might've been able to keep up. Thankfully, the clicking fades into the distance and sooner than later all that's left is the quiet sounds of birds, their own panting, and the rustle of leaves under their feet. His rifle is still in hand when they eventually stop, a small brook causing the blond kid to swear viciously when he steps right in and soaks his foot. Phil can't find it in himself to laugh, but the brunet doesn't even hesitate, cackling at his friend's situation.

"You're so stupid," he says, leaning forward against his knees as he tries to catch his breath while laughing at the same time. "I told you to watch where you're going."

"I was! I was trying to see if you were behind me, you bitch," the blond argues, shaking out his foot and grimacing when it squelches. The brunet laughs again, plopping down onto a rock and, still grinning, looks right at Phil. The grin drops from his face, like he'd just remembered there was someone else in the immediate vicinity. Phil's still catching his breath, leaning against a tree, but he doesn't miss how the kid's fingers twitch toward the handle at his hip and the axe there. To soothe, he holds his hands out, palms facing the two. The

blond's gone all stormy as well, eyebrows scrunched together as he stares at Phil, wet foot forgotten apparently.

"Right," says the blond, tugging out a crossbow bolt from a pouch on his hip and settling it into place on the weapon. "The dumbarse who shot the gun."

"You're the one who was yelling," Phil points out, letting his hands drop but not relaxing. "and waking up all the shitheads who were sleeping in the cars. I wouldn't have had to shoot if there hadn't been a fucking zombie in my face."

"Touche," says the brunet, and it earns him a glare from the other.

"Are you by yourselves?" Phil asks, because it seems to be only them around now. He'd run across a few other survivors while walking, but none of them had been very friendly. It seems like that's the general rule of survival for the apocalypse- if you're on your own, it's easier. Being antisocial just helps with that fact.

"Just us," the brunet says, cutting off the blond by a few seconds judging by how he'd opened his mouth only to snap it shut and glare. "We came by Aylesbury- heading north now. Tommy says it'll be easier out where there was less people."

"Tubbo!" The blond- Tommy, presumably- whips his head to face the other and glares harder than he had been before. Phil stood there in no small amount of shock, really, as he watched the two start to argue. They go back and forth easily, seemingly having forgotten about him standing there as they debate over what to tell the strange guy in the woods or not. After a minute or two of listening to them get louder and louder, he steps forward and shakes a hand in their direction.

"Woah, woah, woah," he says, catching both of their attention again and not flinching when they both go for their weapons. While he doesn't doubt they're both good with them, he also sort of figures they won't fire. "Enough with it. North is smart, I came from there, but there's still a lot in between. How far have you come by yourselves?"

Both of the boys look uncomfortable when he asks that, and it figures. Of course they hadn't survived all this on their own- someone else must've been with them up until recently. He watches them share a glance, then the brown-haired one speaks up again. Tubbo, if Phil had caught his name right.

"Couple towns by ourselves," he says, earning a jab just above his ear from Tommy. "Before that, uh. Not far."

"Tubbo, *shut up*," Tommy hisses, and gives Phil a wary look. Not for the first time, he realizes he's the outsider here. Again, he raises his hands in a pacifying way and takes a couple steps back.

"It's alright, I'm not going to pry," he says, glancing behind them all and lowering his hands. He doesn't hear or see anything, and they'd run for a while. Fairly sure they're safe, he moves to sit at the base of a tree once more and take off his bag. "Just wondering how you two survived with instincts like that."

"I have great instincts, fuck you," Tommy says, and Phil rolls his eyes, pressing his back to the tree and sliding down until he's sitting. Fuck, he's gotten into better shape since the world went to true shit, but a run like that still takes a lot out of him. Add the comedown from the adrenaline rush on top of it, and he's prone to shaking fingers. He ignores them, digging into his backpack for the water bottle there. The creek's gurgling, and he eyes it carefully before downing the rest of what's in his bottle. The brunet- Tubbo, right, seems to have the same idea and turns, dipping his fingers into the water.

"What's your name?" He asks, and Phil wipes at his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Phil," he says honestly. "I'm assuming you're Tubbo. And Tommy, was it?"

"My name's actually Toby- Tommy won't use it, though."

"Fuck you, Tubbo's way cooler." They bicker back and forth for a minute, and Phil's slowly starting to realize that's probably commonplace for them. He takes the moment to think, pressing his head back onto the rough bark of the tree and staring up at the glimpses of sky he can catch through the leaves. It's nice to hear human voices again, even if they're swearing and cursing and so incredibly young. Maybe the youth makes it better, but then he remembers what world they're living in and maybe it doesn't anymore.

"Are you going to keep moving?" He asks, and he can hear the way they both turn to look at him by how their voices simultaneously get louder, then stop entirely. The quiet stretches on for a second too long before Tubbo answers.

"Yes," he says, and when Phil glances back down he can see the uncomfortable look on both their faces. So he doesn't pry. He just nods, shifting an arm underneath him and pushing himself off the ground. He takes a second to wipe the dirt off his butt and refill his water bottle at the creek again before stowing it away. Before he turns back, Phil takes a breath. He can't just leave these two on their own- they'd get themselves killed before too long, as the incident earlier indicated. He wasn't sure how long they'd been by themselves, but it certainly can't have been forever.

Carefully, he adjusts the backpack on his shoulders.

"I'm going that way," he says, pointing a finger in the direction he'd intended to go since he'd seen the road signs. "If you two would like some company. It's not exactly north, but it's not in the complete opposite direction either."

And with that, Phil heads off into the woods.

Behind him, he can hear silence, then quiet talking. He can't make out words or sentences, but they seem to be discussing something or other. Three guesses as to what.

Phil hears footsteps in the leaves behind him and smiles.

Tubbo and Tommy are an interesting pair.

They're best friends, and have been since they were both tiny toddlers. They'd lived in the same town, on the same street, nearly in the same house until they were twelve. When they were twelve, the apocalypse had hit. Phil knows that it's been about four years since then, so by deduction they're both about sixteen years old. They both have impeccable survival skills, even if their instincts are a bit off sometimes. Tommy lights a fire that night in less than a minute, and Tubbo carefully takes food out of his pack while watching Phil for his reaction. He has his own stash, so he doesn't bother to ask about theirs.

Over the fire and food, they talk. Tommy's loud, his voice occasionally rising to levels that makes Phil wince and scan the shadows around them. Tubbo is quieter, but Tommy draws him out of whatever shell he's created for himself and together they wreak havoc upon the conversation. A lot is talked about between the three of them, but nothing is really said. Phil doesn't find out how two twelve-year-olds survived the first few weeks of the world's downfall, nor does he learn how they got through the next four years. Or who taught them how to survive so well. But he does learn that Tubbo's favorite animals are bees, that Tommy's favorite swear is "pussy" and that he has strong opinions on the (now-deceased) Queen of England. Tubbo talks to Phil about interesting magazines they'd found, how Tubbo couldn't really read well due to severe dyslexia, and how he liked numbers better anyways. He could also name twenty-four separate constellations, pointing them out to Phil as the night got darker and darker.

Phil likes them.

He realizes it as he watches Tommy shuffle in the distance, backpack under his head and blanket over his shoulders. He knows he's not asleep, and he's not going to be either. They both seem a little paranoid of the situation as it is. Phil's not entirely sure that they're not going to just steal his things when he turns his back (although his brain is rejecting that possibility more and more) and he wants to stay up to watch for any of the dead besides that. Tubbo's nothing more than a dark lump on the ground, having fallen asleep after their fire had died down to nothing but embers. Phil's eyes creep to the sky, and he traces the newly-named constellations in his head and with his eyes. Human contact is nice. Being able to talk to real people- even if they're two sixteen-year-old teenage boys- is so very nice. It's been forever since he's talked to real people who weren't trying to steal or scam him out of something he had, and these two seem just as genuine and frightened as he feels.

But they are two mouths to feed and clothe. They're two mouths who can hold their own in a fight, but that Phil already knows are reckless and loud. They're liabilities at the end of the day, risks to Phil's own health and safety.

But being able to hear the sound of someone else alive breathing slowly, sleeping, trusting, is almost worth it.

Something shifts, and Phil's immediately on edge.

"Just me," comes a voice through the dark, and he relaxes again. Tommy moves once more, shuffling in the dirt until he's sat across from Phil in the dim light.

"What's up?" Phil asks after a moment, and the teen stares at him from across the way, eyes slightly narrowed, shadows casting dark spots over his face that almost seem to bruise. He looks haggard in a way that no sixteen-year-old ever should look, and Phil knows that the circumstances are extreme but it still aches to think that he's grown up like this.

"Why are you going that way?" Tommy asks after a moment, raising his hand to point in the direction Phil had earlier. "Any specific reason?"

"Not particularly," Phil answers easily, knowing that this is some sort of test just by the tone of Tommy's voice. He hopes he'll pass whatever it is. "Just a direction. Why are you headed north?"

"Less populated," Tommy rationalizes, and that's right, they'd explained earlier. Or had they? Phil suspects there's something more to their travels, but maybe not. Tommy's certainly not handing him information on a silver platter, decorated with gold leaf and truffles. Phil doesn't get the appeal of gold leaf anyways. Sometimes it's better to earn what you get.

"Maybe so. Colder, though. Less houses to squat in," Phil points out, then gestures with one heavy arm to the side. "You two are welcome to come along with me for a bit, if you'd like." He's not quite sure why he's offering, but he is. "Might be a bit more entertaining for me with someone around to talk to."

Tommy regards him again with a cautious look, eyes distrustful as he bundles the blanket more around his shoulders. Phil easily returns the gaze, eyes level with Tommy's and not giving in. They sit like that for a bit, staring at each other, until Tommy turns his gaze away and glances over to where Tubbo's sleeping on the ground, one hand outstretched just beyond the blanket and face turned over so all they can see is a splash of dark brown hair. It almost matches the dirt in color.

"He's the most important thing," Tommy says, and Phil's sort of struck by the fierceness in his tone. "If I even see you glance wrong at him, at us, I'll stab you."

"I don't doubt it." Phil laughs a little, rubbing one hand under his eye and wiping away whatever exhaustion he can. "You two have stuck this whole thing out together, yeah?"

"Yeah." Tommy doesn't look at him, choosing instead to stare at Tubbo still. "We... yeah."

There's quiet for a minute, then Phil hums lightly. "You don't have to tell me anything," he says, leaning back against a tree and tipping his head back against it again. It's not the most comfortable position, but from here he can look up the wide trunk and follow the shadows of the branches as they extend out and into the sky, crossing with the branches of other trees. He can hear Tommy exhale, then the shuffling of blankets as he moves to go lie down by Tubbo. He's still quiet. He stays quiet, long after Phil shuts his eyes and dozes lightly, trusting himself to wake up if there's trouble.

He does not wake up to trouble.

He wakes up to two sleepy teenagers packing their bags, rolling up blankets and shoving them away into their packs. Phil sits up from where he'd slumped slightly, staring at them as Tubbo shoves a bit of dirt over their small campfire and makes sure the embers are cold. Then he comes over to Phil and offers a dirt-stained hand to help him up.

Phil takes it.

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They travel together. At first, they all see it as a temporary thing. Tommy and Tubbo often discuss their plans for the future as though they don't see Phil in it, and oftentimes, Phil does the same in his own mind. A future without the bright, happy laughter trailing behind him through a field of wildflowers, or the anxious shout that is thrown his way when his reaction time is two seconds off when his gun jams and he has to discard it for an axe. Slowly, that future begins to dull in his mind. Tommy and Tubbo become an integral part of his life, just as much as the apocalypse had become. Together they walked through abandoned towns and started to carry their food in one combined backpack, as well as their other supplies. As long as they're together, they might as well share the load after all, Phil rationalizes. Tommy's shoulders are less tense around him and he sleeps through the night more often, Tubbo's smile bright as ever as he hooks his arm through Tommy's, or holds one of Phil's sleeves from behind. They get used to each other, and sooner than later the idea of separating is gone, like it never existed at all.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

the inspo for this beginning part of the chapter came from [this](#) twitter post!!!!!! please go look at this art, it's so soft. <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Phil trudges through the water carefully, legs moving slowly but surely as he hikes the thighs under his arms up just a tad bit higher.

Behind him, he can hear the soft sounds of sleep coming from the tiny boat they'd thrown together out of plywood and duct tape. Tommy's still asleep, having dozed off an hour or so earlier after Tubbo had started answering questions in that sleepy kind of quiet way. How the younger kid is sleeping in his situation is beyond Phil, but he at least takes care not to let the water touch his feet too often. It's up to Phil's hips, cold and dark and sludgy and occasionally he hits his foot on something hard and stiff and he always tenses up, ready to throw Tubbo off and pull out his shotgun. But each time he freezes and waits for the sounds of gurgling dead to push themselves above the water, it never comes. It's always a stick, or a mailbox, or the remnants of some shapeless human-made mass. The water never gets any deeper and Phil's grateful, but he's ready to be out of it.

Floods weren't unexpected. Sewer systems had backed up with leaves and debris after their workers had abandoned them or died, and after a heavy rainstorm had gone on for three days straight their route out of the safe house had been blocked. Phil had waited as long as he could, but before long they had gotten to the bottom of their supplies. So they made the trek out into the floodwaters, hoping that they only would last a street or two before thinning out and only being a nuisance at most. But no. It's been nearly five hours, and Phil's seen no end to the dull water. They'd woken up early, earlier than the boys had gotten up for in a while, so it's not really a surprise their chatter had faded off into sleepy silence after a bit.

Speaking of, one of them speaks up. Tubbo, who's been riding on his back, shifts, then speaks. "Phil," he says, voice quiet and thick with sleep. "...look. Your eight o'clock."

He looks. There are a couple of dilapidated houses rising above the water, and a few cars sitting in the street, gutted and rusted metal all that's left. And in those cars, pressed against the remaining glass, are deadwalkers.

Rotted faces stare blindly out towards them, fingers shifting against the car frame and heads tipping as the ripples from Phil's movements hit them. He slows, then stops, the small boat containing Tommy resting against his hips and back. The ripples stop and the deadwalkers seem to rest after a moment. From behind him, he can hear Tubbo's shaky breath.

“Do you think they know we’re here?” He asks, and Phil tips his head back to try and get a look at his face.

“Shh,” he says, and hopes it’s reassuring enough. Holding tight to Tubbo’s legs, he begins to shift forward again. He drags his feet along the pavement, doing his best not to let the water move too much around them. Tubbo stays quiet, but Phil knows his eyes are on the dead and takes that as enough warning to be able to look ahead and work out their escape route. The water doesn’t seem to get any lower at any point, but there are a few houses coming up on the right that they could potentially get behind or in. It could serve as a way to cut their movements off from these deadwalkers- he thought he saw four or five, and while he trusts Tommy and Tubbo to fight their way out, there’s other dangers lying below the water. And other dead that he’s sure will expose themselves with the ruckus they’d make. He takes Tubbo’s silence as reassurance that his movements aren’t alerting them, and changes their course slightly to head toward one of the houses. Slowly they go, Phil taking one careful step after another and making sure that Tommy in his boat is floating softly behind them, not hitting anything. The rope connecting them is short and thick, wrapped a few times around Phil’s waist and securely knotted around one of the small support pieces on the boat.

“Door on the right,” Tubbo says quietly once they’re close to the house, and Phil takes his guidance without question. Towards the right they go, keeping his eyes on the water and avoiding what looks like a piece of an aluminum roof. Finally, after far too long of holding his breath, Phil pushes open the back door to the flooded house. It’s half-open, leading into the kitchen, and he slowly makes his way inside. Tubbo relaxes as they get out of sight of visible deadwalkers, and Phil finds the stairs in a few moments.

“Stay here,” he tells him, letting Tubbo off onto relatively dry space and untying Tommy from around his waist. He hands the rope to Tubbo, whose face is pale and one cheek still bruised from a tussle last week. “I’m going to clear down here, then we can head upstairs and rest. Don’t wake him up just yet,” he says, nodding toward Tommy, then shifts to make a loop of the downstairs. Inside, the water is lower than outside in the street, but it’s darker and dingier. He keeps a firm hand on his axe as he sweeps his feet around, pulling up any object he comes across. None of them are deadwalkers.

Coming back to the stairs, he finds Tubbo and Tommy where he left them, although Tommy’s sat up and awake now. He glares at Phil as he comes around the corner, but Phil just holds a finger up to his mouth and gives him a look. Whatever words Tommy has for him can wait until Phil’s swept upstairs. He heaves himself out of the water, brushing past Tubbo and taking a moment to slip off his boots and socks, grinning as he squeezes them out and both boys grimace. His feet are pale and damp, so he leaves his shoes off as he makes his way upstairs. Everything’s a bit damp in the hallway, probably thanks to an open window at the end of the long space. He takes a minute to shut it, peering out the glass and making sure nothing was headed their way from this direction. Each of the bedrooms comes out empty, and the bathroom as well. He determines which one’s driest, then heads back to the stairs. Tubbo’s already at the top, peering around the wall and his face lights up when he sees Phil sheathing the axe.

“It’s empty,” he promises. “Second door on the left is the biggest. Get in there and dry off.”

"Thank god," Tommy says, pushing past Tubbo with a huff. He's got their backpack on his back and nudges past Phil, heading toward the room. Tubbo follows, and Phil leans back to call out again.

"Raid the closets for blankets and dry clothes. I'm going to check out the kitchen- don't get too loud, there are still things outside that I don't want to deal with right now." A chorus of "okays!" reaches his ears and he smiles, heading back down into the water. One of them (probably Tubbo) has tied their boat to the railing of the stairs, floating absently with only the damp blanket from the last house they'd been at. Phil tosses it into the wreck that is the living room, heading to the kitchen. The pantry's empty for the most part, a bag of crisps up in the very top that he manages to snag. The fridge is no better, which is expected, and he hardly tries the cabinets although there are a few tins of green beans. Better than nothing, so he tucks them into the crook of his elbow and heads back up into the dry space. When he enters the master bedroom, Tommy's tucked up on the bed while Tubbo's at the window, peeking out into the street.

"It's raining again," he informs Phil, and Tommy groans, shoving his face deeper into the pillow he'd been lying on.

"Good thing we got in here when we did, then," Phil comments, dumping the cans onto the foot of the bed and watching them race to inspect what he'd found. Tommy turns one of them over in his hands and scoffs again, but doesn't directly say anything negative. Tubbo grins.

"Green beans!" He exclaims, tossing the can he'd grabbed back into the pile of four. "Yum!"

"I bet they're old as fuck," Tommy points out, but Tubbo just shrugs and shoves him over so he can clamber onto the bed. Phil sets about drying himself off, snagging a towel from where one of the two had discarded it and changing out his pants for the set he kept in the backpack. Hours in the water leaves him feeling damp and muggy no matter how much he rubs with the towel, and the humidity in the air certainly isn't helping.

"-were hogging the boat," Tubbo's saying when Phil tunes back in, and he gives them both a look at the argumentative tone. He knows traveling like this is hard, hell, they're all tired, but he doesn't want to deal with any fights right now.

"If you'd been in the boat, I think we'd be in more trouble than we are," Phil says to try and placate Tubbo. "Tommy would've shouted when he saw them out there, instead of telling me *quietly*."

"Fuck you!" Tommy bounces up onto his knees at the end of the bed, glaring at Phil. "There were zombies out there? And neither of you bothered to wake me up?"

"Like I said," Phil continues. "Quietly. I don't want to have to deal with five of them in hip-deep water that I can't see into." Pointedly, he gives Tommy a look, who shrinks back and shrugs after a moment, like the facts are maybe permissible excuses for not letting him fight.

"Fair enough," he says, and Tubbo cackles behind him against the headboard.

"I'm so better at being stealthy—" he says, kicking his foot out and catching Tommy on the back of his leg with it. Phil just watches as Tommy turns, tackling Tubbo right in return. He rolls his eyes as they start to fight, letting them get the energy out. It's needed and if he doesn't, then tomorrow will be worse when they start back into the water. They play for a bit, until Tubbo's got Tommy's head pressed down into the sheets and a knee on his back with a triumphant (but quiet) cry. They start for round two, and Phil gets up from where he'd been setting up a blanket pad and pillows on the floor for himself, grabbing the cans to crack them open.

"Come get something to eat," he says, snagging the pack from where Tommy had dropped it. Some dried rabbit comes out, and the can opener.

Dinner is quiet, and so is the night. Despite having slept and dozed most of the day, Tommy and Tubbo quiet themselves as it gets dark and the soft patter of rain apparently lulls them to sleep quicker than any lullaby of zombie noises ever did.

Phil lies awake for a while, staring out the window and trying his best not to think.

Morning comes, and Phil is hot. Warm. Physically sweating under the blanket he'd piled on last night while listening to the rain and sounds of sleep from the bed above him. He groans a bit, ignoring the hands shaking him awake in favor of trying to shove off the blanket.

"Phil!" Tubbo doesn't sound too alarmed, so he doesn't immediately reach for the gun. "Phil, get up!"

"I told you to let him sleep for a little longer," Tommy says from somewhere across the room, and he can hear fumbling around as something clunks to the carpeted floor. Phil decides to keep his eyes stubbornly shut.

"But it stopped raining! It's sunny, even!" That explains why he's hot, then. And why the room seems brighter when he finally decides to open his eyes. Phil blinks the sticky sleep from them, lifting his hand as he sits up to get the gunk out of the corners. Tubbo's sitting next to him and turned away, facing to where Tommy's shoving the cans of green beans into the backpack. The rest of the room is fairly clean, the bed not even messy from when they'd slept in it last night. Probably Tubbo's doing, but Phil wasn't awake to confirm it.

"Did you go downstairs?" He asks, moving to tug his shoes and socks on from where they sit beside his makeshift bed. Tubbo shakes his head, but Tommy nods.

"Just to look," he says, and Phil rolls his eyes as he tightens his laces. Tommy can hold his own, sure, and nothing went wrong, but still. It was risky and Phil knows Tommy knows based on how he won't look his way. Despite his displeasure, he doesn't say anything and instead starts to help clean up what they brought in and raid the rest of the place. He sends

Tubbo to check the bathrooms for anything helpful, and Tommy stays with him as they check each of the bedrooms over again for anything helpful. There are some teenage boy clothes in one of the closets, covered in a layer of dust but good enough when Phil swats a hand around to dislodge it. He lets Tommy dig through for some new shirts and limits them both to two. Clothing isn't really in short supply like food is, but it's nice to see their faces light up at some stupid shirt logo they haven't seen in ages.

Eventually, it's back down into the flood waters. This time, Tommy's insistent on walking alongside Phil and Tubbo takes the boat. Ropes catch around their waists and as Phil ties Tommy to himself he gets a hand on his shoulder, catching his eyes.

"Stay behind me the whole time," he instructs him. "Don't stray, don't make sudden movements, and if you feel or see anything, tell me." Tommy's mouth is set in a firm line, and he just nods. "Alright, mates," Phil says once he's sure Tommy's got those instructions in his head. Tubbo slips into the boat, wincing at how it rocks and nearly tips. They're not the best builders, but it's still afloat so Phil supposes it's better than nothing. "Off we go."

Off they go, into the water. It's no higher than it was yesterday, but there's a slight current under the still surface, especially in the roads. Phil keeps to where he thinks the sidewalks would be, sloshing their way through the mud and grime and occasionally shifting whenever he comes across something large and immovable under the water. It's up to his hips and Tommy's waist, the kid grimacing every time Phil gets a peek back at him. But he follows the instructions from before they left, keeping behind Phil and a hand on the boat Tubbo's floating in. Tubbo serves as their eyes, not worrying about what's in the water and instead watching ahead of them to figure out which way to go.

"It looks shallower up ahead," he says after an hour or so of silence other than the occasional callout for directions or warning. No deadwalkers in sight this morning, but Phil's cautious anyways. There's a soft ripple as Tubbo shifts to peek up higher from the boat. "And I see more buildings."

"Probably the center of town," Tommy says, and Phil agrees.

"Should we avoid it?" Tubbo asks, the water rippling again. "It definitely gets shallower up there, though. Maybe knees, at most."

"We can probably head that way," Phil says, having stopped for the moment. He turns, watching the two behind him and then peering beyond. "I haven't seen any of them around, so I feel like anywhere we get out at this point is going to be risky." He doesn't miss how they look at each other, a little worried but determined at the same time. Tubbo gnaws on his lip, then shrugs. Phil takes it as an okay, and turns back around to keep dredging on.

Tubbo was right. After another block or so of flooded houses and a lopsided tree, the water shallows a bit. Then more, then more, until all that's left is up to mid-calf. It goes on like that for a bit, but Phil can see dry land ahead. It's relieving. He slows to a stop and turns a little bit, facing the two behind him and starting to untie the ropes around their waists.

"Tubbo, hop out," he says, waiting for him to do so before taking the rest of their stuff out of the little raft. He gives it a shove back into deeper water. "Say goodbye to the boat."

“We’re 16, not 3,” Tommy grumbles, but Tubbo lifts his hand to wave anyways.

“Bye, boat,” he says. “You were kind of shit, but thanks for keeping us mostly dry and safe!” Phil finds himself laughing a little, bringing a hand up to stifle his amused snorts and not get too loud.

“Come on,” he says after a minute, turning to slosh towards dry land. “We’re not far now.”

Towns are dangerous.

They’re not deadly for the most part, but avoiding them is what Phil prefers. He’d seen what towns could be like, especially if they had a larger population before the infection spread. Huge masses of deadwalkers, ones that could run quick and spit at you before you even had a chance to pull your mask on. They all do so preemptively now, the water gone from their feet as they head onto dry concrete and asphalt of the road. Phil’s glad to be out of the water, the constant pit of fear in his stomach settling a little bit as it deals with something. This kind of danger is familiar, the constant checking around corners and holding Tommy back before he can forge onwards without looking. For a kid who’s growing up in the apocalypse, Phil would think that he would be more cautious. But it turns out to mostly be moot, since as they walk, Phil hears and sees nothing.

No clicking. No shuffling. No groaning wheezes.

No monsters.

The town is silent and empty. Even the stores that he passes, with their open doors and empty shelves, are quiet. Usually there would be at least a few deadwalkers in there, shuffling in the aisles and mindlessly scraping across the tile as they hid from the midday sun. But nothing’s there. They’re all empty, empty enough that Phil lets Tubbo and Tommy out of his sight for a few minutes so he can raid a pharmacy and they can check out one of the dilapidated comic stores. He comes back with a bottle of Aspirin, a rare find, and they come back each with one comic book to their name. Phil admires their restraint. They still see no monsters.

“Do you think someone’s come through and just... cleared this place out?” Tommy asks, and Phil doesn’t bother to tell him to keep his voice down. They’re in the back of what was once a grocery store, sat on the corner of two streets and with a good long view down either way. They’d be able to see anything coming for a block or two.

“If they did, then where are the bodies?” Tubbo points out. “Or the blood?”

“Maybe they cleaned up. Took ‘em somewhere,” Tommy says, hopping up to sit on the counter of one of the registers. He leans back, running a finger over the edge of a faded magazine. Phil leans against the counter across from him, Tubbo peering under the counters a

couple feet away in search of candy. Phil doesn't think there's any left, but he won't stop him from looking.

"Seems rather organized," he points out. Killing all those deadwalkers, then dragging their bodies somewhere to be disposed of would be a huge effort. Especially in a town this size. It would require more than one person for sure.

"Think there's a compound?" Tubbo seems to have the same idea, and pops up from where he'd been crouched down, eyes shining. "Maybe there are people here! Somewhere! Real people, alive. We could find them and say hello!" Based on the grimace Tommy puts out, Phil doesn't think that's exactly his ideal plan of action.

"I don't know," Phil says, running a hand through his hair and watching Tubbo disappear behind the counters again. "Compounds don't usually take more than one person on at a time. Rations and all that. We don't have any marketable skills, either."

"We fight good," Tubbo says, voice slightly muffled.

"Well," Phil corrects him. "We fight well. And we do, but most people do nowadays. If you don't fight well, you don't survive."

"We fight awesome!" Tommy says, bringing his arms up in a strongman pose. "Any compound who rejects us would be stupid. We could clear out a town like this, no problem! Maybe we should! Then we could live here!"

It's not like Phil hadn't thought about settling down somewhere. Finding a safehouse, staying permanently. Maybe taking others in, starting a compound of their own. But here.... He glances around, a small shiver working its chilly fingers up his spine. "Not here," he says, crossing his arms. "We're not staying here. For the night, we can set up in the back if you guys want. But we're moving on tomorrow."

"Awww." Tubbo finds his way to their section of counters again, hands empty of any candy. He doesn't seem too disappointed. "I like it here. It's quiet."

"Too quiet," Tommy says, and when Phil looks at him he can see the same look of hesitation that Phil knows he must have. Tubbo looks between them, then out into the street.

"It is weird," he concedes, and all three of them fall silent.

Phil claps his hands, the noise soft but still making both boys' shoulders jump.

"Into the back!" He says, gesturing for them to get moving and pick up their stuff. "Come on. Storage room. It's getting dark, and I want to get some sleep tonight."

Tommy slips off the counter, tugging a couple magazines along with him, and Tubbo moves to pick up both their backpacks. Phil herds them into the backroom. It's the only place in the store with only one door and window, making it a good spot for them to all get some sleep without having to worry about staying up in shifts. Tommy and Tubbo start to get out their sleeping supplies as Phil pushes a few things in front of the door, blockading them all inside

for the night, and Tubbo uses the can opener on the second can of beans. It's not the most conservative use of their rations, but Phil doesn't say anything about it.

Dinner is over quick and Phil uses one of the wind-up torch lights that Tubbo had brought with him when it all started to light up the room a bit, letting them all have a bit of light to see by. When he glances up from a novel he'd been working through, front cover torn and worn down but pages still good, Tommy and Tubbo are lying on their stomachs together with a magazine open in front of them. He doesn't say a word, just watching as Tubbo fills in the sudoku boxes with quick precision and Tommy races to finish the word search first.

"I win!" Tubbo says in a hushed celebratory tone, Tommy slamming his head down against the pages.

"You always win," he complains, and their voices fade into soft bickering as Phil looks back down at his book, smiling.

Later, when the torch has dimmed a bit and Tommy and Tubbo have fallen asleep, pens still in hands, Phil dumps their backpacks out. He lines all of their items up, folding the shirts they'd snagged from the house before neatly and stacking their extra clothing in the corner. It's not the clothing that's important after all.

Their inventory is as such: one and a half bottles of Aspirin, one slightly-used first aid kit with gauze, bandaids, small scissors, two compress dressings, a breathing barrier for CPR, 2 pairs of gloves (size large), one slightly used tube of antibiotic cream, a thermometer, tweezers, and two antiseptic wipes. They have three blankets, which are all in use at the moment for their beds, and one small stuffed monkey that Tubbo had been carrying since Phil met him. A few pens and markers litter the bottom of the bags, which Phil scoops up and places carefully in the front pocket. For food, there are two more tins of green beans left, one pack of dried rabbit from a lucky shot he'd gotten in the forest, a pack of crisps, and a singular granola bar.

It's the food that worries him most. They're dangerously low, low enough that he considers taking most of the day tomorrow to scavenge in the town before leaving. The store they were in now was looted almost entirely, but there's a chance others weren't. He looks over their meager supplies and then back towards Tommy and Tubbo. He knows they're small for their age- they're not getting the right nutrients, the right vitamins that they need to grow properly. It worries him, keeping him up at night like this just thinking about how it's going to affect them when they get older. Not to mention things like dental hygiene, although Phil insists they all carry toothbrushes and at least brush when they can. Water hasn't been a huge deal- what with all the rain and streams they find that fill their water bottles up to the brim.

Another thing that worries him is winter.

This'll be their first winter together. Phil's noticed how the air's getting chillier at night and he's sure they have too. Usually, Phil's hunkered down somewhere the past four years, staying in one spot and only having to provide for himself. Three people is substantially more than one, and he had only scraped by last year. With two growing teenage boys alongside, he was worried for this round of snow. They had to find jackets, warmer clothing, more food.

They needed a safe spot to wait out the cold weather. Lost in these thoughts, Phil almost didn't notice the soft knock at the door.

Knock. A knock at the door, which was barricaded by heavy shelving and a few empty barrels from something a long time ago. His head snapped up and he reached out for the torch, shutting it off with a quick movement. He sat there for a long moment, eyes adjusting to the dark.

The knock came again.

Fear rose in the pit of his stomach, but he didn't move. Didn't breathe. His axe was in reach, as it always was, and both Tommy and Tubbo were asleep. If he just stayed quiet, whatever was out there would leave.

Another knock, this time followed rapidly by a set of four or five. Louder this time. Phil turned to make sure neither of the boys were awake- eyes shut, chests moving slow. Good. He glanced back at the door, listening intently. There's shuffling from outside, the sound of footsteps. One more set of knocking, eerie in how human it sounds. Phil holds his breath.

More shuffling, and then it all fades into silence. No more knocks come for a long time after that, but Phil stays up anyways. Just in case.

Tommy and Tubbo wake up a little after the sun's risen, and Phil hasn't slept at all. He's leaned against the wall, packed all their things after his check last night, and kept himself up worrying the rest of the night. He's jumpy, and he knows the boys see it in him, but he doesn't tell them about the knocking or shuffling from late last night. They skip breakfast, instead packing their things and heading out from the storage room. Phil takes a moment to inspect the outside of the door- there's no blood or anything, no signs of anything being there at all. Just the normal wear and tear. No marks from the knocking, either. Maybe he imagined it- but that thought is no more comforting than when he thought it had been a deadwalker. Zombies first, now he's just going insane. That would be an interesting turn of events.

They head out into the street once Phil's deemed it safe enough to. It's sunny again today, the clouds from last week's rainstorms gone and only blue sky above them. While his gut says it's a bad idea, his stomach says another thing, and they explore more into the town. There are no signs of the dead, just like yesterday, and it makes last night's encounter all the more strange in his mind.

They look in a few stores, Tubbo getting a stroke of luck and finding a squished but unopened bar of Snickers under the counter at a drugstore they stop in. He grins, shoving it away into his pack and ignoring Tommy's cries of "unfair!" Phil makes him promise to share. More luck is had when he finds a bag of rice and more cans of mixed vegetables in a house

they raid, tucking it all away into their backpacks. The food makes him feel more secure, but it's still not enough and he knows it. They have to find a place to stop.

But not here. Not in this quiet, empty town, where he expects a hoard at every corner and yet finds nothing.

But there is something.

Tubbo's the first one to notice. He stops in the middle of the road where they're walking, glancing around them all at the pavement with a curious look.

"What is that?" He points out, one finger going out to trace a line of... something. Phil follows his gaze and so does Tommy, both of them making their way over and all three crouching to inspect it. It's a piece of twine, small but intact, down the very center of the road. Underneath it is a strange green tint to the pavement, some sort of moss. Tubbo reaches out, like he's going to poke it, and Tommy's hand shoots out to knock it away.

"Don't fucking touch it!" He says, verbalizing what Phil had been thinking exactly. "What if it's like, poisonous? The fuck, Tubbo?"

"How else are we supposed to find out if it's dangerous?" He asks, and Tommy facepalms.

"Not by you touching it and dying," Phil says gently, tugging them both up by their sleeves. Tubbo's still looking down, eyes tracing the twine and moss and following it up the road in the direction they were going.

"It keeps going," he says, taking a couple steps alongside it.

"Masks," Phil says, and both boys obediently tug the coverings on.

"There's more up ahead!" Tubbo says, voice slightly muffled by the fabric and mask now covering his nose and mouth. Phil tugs his own on, following slightly behind as Tubbo and Tommy take the lead in following the twine and moss. As they walk, more of the ground gets green, and the twine crisscrosses along the pavement, following the sections where it seems to be the deepest. Like veins.

"Someone's clearly been here," Phil says, catching up the two and stopping them with a hand on their shoulders. "So we should go." That feeling is back from yesterday, shivers up his spine and a cold feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"Can we just look a bit further?" Tubbo asks, and Tommy gives him a look.

"I dunno, man. This is sort of freaking me out." Phil agrees with Tommy's statement, but Tubbo just glances back down the street, where the moss is clearly growing in a sea of green. There's twine everywhere down there, crisscrossing and tracking vines of darker color. Phil can see the curiosity peaking in him, so he sighs. He's going to regret this. He glances around, finding the tallest building he can see, and nods.

"Let's go inside, and up. Alright? We can get a vantage point from there to look, but we're not getting any closer. Okay?"

“Okay!” Tubbo seems happy with this arrangement, and Tommy at least doesn’t argue as they all make their way into the building. There’s nothing to clear- no monsters at all- so they make it to the roof without much incident. Phil shoulders open the door onto the flat, gravel packed roof, and Tubbo ducks under his arm to make his way to the edge. He stills.

Phil and Tommy join him, and also go very, very still.

There’s a mass of deadwalkers in the center of all the green, packed together in a tight circle. None of them are moving, in fact- all of them seem to be really, truly dead. From this height, it’s hard to see exactly but-

“Are those flowers?” Tubbo says it before anyone else can, leaning dangerously far over the side of the building. Phil grabs him by the hood of his sweatshirt and tugs him back a bit, for his own peace of mind.

“What the fuck,” Tommy breathes, leaning over as well and Tubbo’s right back, so fuck it. He leans over too, trying to get a better look. It certainly appears to be some sort of flower, or leafy shape bursting out of each deadwalker’s mouth and eyes. Their heads are tipped back, the blooms facing the sky and drinking in the sunlight.

“What the fuck,” Phil agrees. From the looks of it, there are a couple hundred spread out in this section of street. It makes sense they didn’t see any of the dead earlier, now, since they all appear to be here. They’re a couple blocks away still, but Phil can’t help but feel uneasy. He glances over at Tubbo and Tommy and finally pulls away from the edge of the roof, tugging them both back again. “We should go. Come on.”

“Wait-” Tubbo says, slipping out of Phil’s grasp and ignoring the swear that slips out of him as he does. Tubbo’s a quick little guy. “There’s someone down there!”

“What?!”

They’re all back at the edge of the roof again, and Tubbo reaches out with one hand. Phil stubbornly clings onto his hood, not letting go this time. He does, however, follow Tubbo’s pointing and catches glimpse of movement, something ducking and weaving through the crowd of dead. They don’t pay it any mind, silent and still and facing the sky. As it ducks through the crowd and into a thinner section of monsters, Phil can make out a humanoid shape for sure, face covered by a thick mask-looking layer and almost every inch of the person covered in fabric, head to toe. They weave their way out of the crowd, coming to a slow stop in the street and then after a moment of just standing there, looks up.

Right at them.

Phil tugs both of the boys downwards, ignoring their muffled noises of surprise, and quietly he holds a finger up in front of his mask. Making sure they both stay down, he risks a peek up and glances above the wall blocking them from falling off the roof directly. The person is gone.

“Time to go,” he says, keeping his voice low and forcing it to stay even, not panicked. “Hup, come on, other side of the roof. Let’s go. Don’t argue.” Thankfully, neither of them do. They

make their way across the roof in a weird, hunched run that Phil would find funny if it weren't such a serious moment, and he peers down the side of the building, then across at the other one. There's a fire escape across the way, but they'd have to jump. The gap isn't that wide.

That's what he tells himself at least, as he helps Tommy up onto the wall and tells him to jump.

"What?" Tommy asks, giving him a look that's more fearful than anything he thinks he's seen before on Tommy.

"Jump," he says, glancing back toward the door to the roof. "You can make it. It's okay. Jump, then Tubbo will, and you catch him to make sure he makes it."

"Phil—"

"You can do it Tommy. I promise." Phil gives him an encouraging nod, and Tommy stares at him for a second, then at Tubbo, whose eyes are wide and scared over his mask. He glances over at the other building, then seems to steel himself. He jumps, and for a second Phil can't breathe. But like he'd said before- the gap's not that wide and the fall is downwards, so Tommy lands on the gravel with a thump and a rush of breath that they can hear even on the other side. Phil makes sure Tommy's standing and ready before he helps Tubbo up onto the wall of the roof, and sends him over. They both make it fine, thank god, and then it's his turn. Carefully, he pushes himself up, eyeing the gap, then hears a clang behind him and doesn't even bother to turn and look. He just jumps instead, weightless in the sky for a moment, before the shock of gravel and weight hits him. He rolls, hearing Tommy and Tubbo say something but can't hear it over the rush of blood in his ears.

"I'm fine—" he promises, pushing himself up and glancing behind them.

The person from the crowd of deadwalkers is staring right at them again, this time from where Phil had just jumped from. His hand goes to his axe immediately, shifting on his feet to crowd Tubbo and Tommy behind him. They can't make it down the fire escape with the person right there, and he can see the crossbow on their hip even if they did want to try.

"Phil," Tubbo says, and he can feel a hand clinging onto the sleeve of his shirt. He reaches back with his free hand, giving the small one there a pat. He can hear behind him Tommy shuffling, and the sound of his weapon unsheathing. He holds out his own axe, pointed up at the person.

"We're leaving," he says, voice firm and loud enough to carry. "We're leaving, and you're going to leave us alone. We don't have anything of value, and we just were passing through." His hand is steady as he holds the weapon out, and for a moment the person on the roof above them is silent. He can hear Tommy shuffling again, feet impatient in the gravel, and he prays he doesn't say anything. After an uncomfortable few seconds of silence, he opens his mouth again to say something- but the person beats him to it.

"Did you touch the moss?"

The question catches him off-guard, and the voice, too. They're American, whoever they are, and sound young. Their voice is raspy, like they haven't spoken in a while.

"What?" He asks, and the person tips their head to the side, like they're exasperated.

"Did any of you touch the moss?" They repeat, and Phil slowly shakes his head.

"No," he tells them, and there's another few seconds of silence.

"Okay," the person says, and as sudden as they'd appeared, they back up and go out of view. Phil's silent, standing there for a second and stunned a bit by the encounter. He almost doesn't register the lack of hand on his sleeve for a moment until Tubbo's already ahead of him, heading toward the edge of the roof with a determined glint in his eyes.

"Wait!" He says, voice loud. "Why shouldn't we touch the moss?" Tommy's already ahead of Phil as well, and he follows them both up and snags the backs of their hoodies.

"Tubbo!" Tommy says, machete in hand. "Tubbo, what?"

"What?" The voice is back, and so is the figure. They stand at the edge of the roof again, looking down, as if drawn back by the question. They stare down at the trio, sounding almost... surprised.

"Why shouldn't we touch the moss?" Tubbo repeats, staring up at the figure as well.

"Tubbo, leave it," Phil says, trying to be firm. "Let's go."

"Did you touch it?" The masked person asks, and Tubbo shakes his head, ignoring Phil's words and Tommy, tugging on his arm to try and get him to go. "It makes you sick."

That makes them all freeze, looking up again to the person. Tubbo tips his head down, like he's thinking about something, and Phil knows he's got that expression that he always has whenever he's trying to do one of the word searches that Tommy loves so much but Tubbo can never even start. "How?" He finally asks, glancing up again. Phil again feels the cold creeping up his spine, but it's less so this time. The person above them seems more confused than anything else, staring down. This close, Phil can make out their eyes at least and tufts of hair peeking out from where they aren't covered by fabric.

"Spores," they say, and then glance back toward the other side of the roof they're on. "They get inside you and make you sick. Don't eat anything you find here unless it was prepackaged."

"Like allergies?" Tubbo asks, and the person just stares at them again. Phil hopes it's not allergies. If this thing was airborne, they're all fucked. They were fucked the moment they stepped into this town.

"Sort of," the person says, and Phil's had enough. He gives Tubbo another tug, catching his attention and gaze.

"We're going now," he says, glancing at the fire escape. "Come on. Down. Let's go."

“But-” Phil cuts Tubbo off before he can say anything else.

“No buts. We’re leaving. I’m not risking either of you touching this shit and getting sick, if what they say is right.” He glances up, but the person is gone again. The shivers are fading, and he just wants to leave and get out of here for good. Out of this town, away from whatever was going on with those monsters. Somewhere where they were at least guaranteed a little more safety. Tubbo makes a frustrated noise, but follows their lead as they head down the fire escape with care. Tommy’s quiet, which is weird for the moment, but then Phil catches the worried little glances he shoots towards Tubbo whenever he thinks no one’s looking and it makes a bit more sense. They make it to the ground in one piece, and when their feet hit pavement there’s no sign of the masked figure from the roof. “Let’s go,” Phil says, turning his head left and out towards the woods and treeline. “We’re not staying here anymore.”

“It creeps me the fuck out,” Tommy says, and Phil can’t help but agree. Tubbo seems somewhat frustrated, trailing along behind them as they move away from the center of the town and out towards the woods again. He keeps glancing behind them, and Phil eventually falls back a bit to match his pace.

“Tubbo,” he says, catching his attention. “I know it’s interesting, but we’re not going back.”

“But that person,” Tubbo says. “They were alone.”

“Probably for a reason!” Tommy calls out from ahead of them, having forged into the brush. He was whacking at trees and branches periodically, clearing them a path as they went. They’d passed the last house a bit ago, and Phil’s glad to be rid of it. The woods are less dangerous, all things considered. Less deadwalkers, less people, less of everything.

“Probably for a reason,” Phil agrees, reaching out to ruffle Tubbo’s hair and then rest his hand on his shoulder. “Let’s leave it behind us, okay? We have other things to worry about now.”

“Oh-kay,” Tubbo sighs, giving one last look behind them as they move on into the woods. As much as Phil tries to convince himself that’s the end of it, some little nagging bit in the back of his brain insists that’s not true.

They walk for a while, even after it gets dark at Phil’s insistence. While it might be a tad more dangerous than normal, he ignores the bitching and insists they go until they can’t anymore. Tubbo and Tommy eventually lapse into miserable, quiet silence, and when Phil tells them to stop and set up they hardly get their blankets out before they’re both dead asleep, leaned up against each other and breathing quietly. Phil stays up as long as he can, leaning against a tree trunk and holding the torch in his hand, winding it absently until the light is bright enough to make both boys shift when he flicks it on. He’s exhausted, but knows he has to stay awake. He has to. He can’t fall asleep. The sun is creeping through the

trees, faint light in the distance, and the torch is heavy in his hand. It's early morning. There are birds chirping, like lullabies, and Phil's eyes are heavy.

He wakes up to screeching.

For a moment he's disoriented, the dirt cold under his legs and sun in his eyes. It's morning still, dew dripping off the leaves on a bush next to him, but the loud noise and sudden pull to wakefulness makes him forget everything for a moment. It only lasts a second, though, before he's shifting and glancing around in a panic for the source of the screech. He doesn't have to look far.

"It's all gone!" Tommy's holding up one of their packs, the one that Phil distinctly remembered shoving the bag of rice in, the tins of veggies and green beans, the candy bar Tubbo had found. "All of it!" Now, the bag seems to be empty. Tubbo is sat on the ground, bleary eyed and rubbing sleep from his face, seemingly just as confused as Phil is.

He thumps his head back against the wood of the tree and swears.

All of it's gone. Tommy was right in that regard, except for the old granola bar down at the very bottom of the bag. It's in crumbly bits now when they open it, from being crushed under everything else.

"No wonder they left it," Tommy complains, Phil watching from the sidelines as he splits the remnants of the bar with Tubbo. He had insisted they eat it- he wasn't hungry (a lie) and they needed it more (the truth). They didn't really argue with him, and by the way they scarf it down he realizes they hadn't eaten anything really at all the day before. Shit. Shit.

Phil resists the urge to swear again, staring at the empty backpack and mentally berating himself for falling asleep. He should've stayed awake, should've kept an eye out. That was everything they had- and now it was gone. Now they'd have to find something today, and their best bet was back in the direction of the town. Back in the direction of the person who Phil was pretty sure stole from them.

"We should steal it back," Tommy argues as they roll up the blankets, tucking them into the first aid bag. That had been left untouched- probably because it was being used as a pillow by Tommy that night. "It's only fair. He left us with fucking nothing."

"A granola bar isn't nothing," Tubbo points out, but the argument is weak and the glare he receives from Tommy is fairly deserving.

"Enough," Phil says, cutting them both off from the spat that is sure to follow. He runs a hand through his hair, staring off in the direction they'd come from. Anger rises in his stomach slightly, and after a second he nods. "Get your things, and keep your weapons out."

“...seriously?” Tommy looks a bit shocked. “We’re doing my idea? Stealing shit? Smashing shit? For real?”

“For real,” Phil says, making his way to his feet and stretching his arms out, cracking his wrists. “We’re going to get our shit back, and if that requires us smashing shit and stealing shit then so be it. But you need to listen to everything I say, including if I tell you to just book it. Alright?”

“It’s one versus three!” Tommy crows, swinging his backpack onto his shoulders and wielding his machete out in front of him, like some sort of silly pirate pose. “How difficult could this even be?”

As it turns out to be, very difficult.

The first problem is finding their shit. The town is as silent as it was before, and Phil doesn’t let Tommy make a ruckus- the chances of waking up the deadwalkers isn’t zero as far he knows. So they go on the hunt instead, circling around the town center and giving it a relatively wide berth. They search every building, scouring it from top to bottom, and yet find no sign of the thief from yesterday. Phil’s just about ready to give up and let Tommy start screeching his head off as a last resort, when he hears voices. They’d split up in this latest building, him sending Tommy to the first floor and Tubbo to the second, himself staying on the ground floor and checking each apartment carefully. The whole town was pretty much looted, but it wasn’t much of a concern as finding their original things was. He’d started up the stairs to find Tommy when he’d heard the sound of voices coming from above, and instead kept going.

“-people can’t be nobody.” Tubbo’s voice floats down the stairwell, and Phil quiets himself as he climbs up. There’s a pause, then another voice. The person from yesterday. After a second, he continues up the stairs.

“I am,” they say, and Phil can practically hear Tubbo thinking.

“My name’s Toby,” he says after a second, and Phil sighs slightly. “But everyone calls me Tubbo.”

“That’s nice.” They don’t sound very enthused, and Phil almost has to laugh with how quickly Tubbo responds despite it.

“How do you know so much about the... the moss?” He struggles to find the right words for a minute, and Phil slows his ascent. He’s not asking about the food, which is interesting. Distracting, maybe? Tubbo’s certainly smart enough to be able to stall for a bit while Phil and Tommy make their way up.

“I was a botany student.” Huh. From how clipped their answers are, Phil almost expected them not to be so forthcoming.

“Botany. Plants, right?” Silence, and then Tubbo forges on. “I always liked plants. It’s weird to think they’ve made the world go upside-down. That’s why everyone got sick, right? The moss? And spores?”

“Kind of.” The voice sounds... amused, almost. Phil can understand. Talking with Tubbo is like that. “It’s a fungi, technically. More related to animals than plants.”

“How do you know?” Tubbo sounds legitimately interested, and Phil slowly starts to climb the stairs again. He peers into each hallway as he goes up, finally finding the one where they’re at. The door to the hallway is open slightly and he slips inside, locating the room with the voices carefully.

“Botany classes.” They’re louder now, and Phil tips his head to slowly peer into the room.

“Do you use a mirco- mirco- mi... microscope?” Tubbo’s across the ruined living room from the masked figure, his own mask on as well. He’s looking at the person, and his gaze doesn’t even flick to Phil but Phil knows he’s been seen. Smart kid.

“Microscope?” The person tips their head, and Tubbo smiles, snapping his fingers.

“That!” He grins, making a circle with his fingers and peering through it. Phil’s... not quite sure what that’s supposed to mean, so he ignores it.

“No.” Their voice is flat, and Tubbo lowers his fingers with a disappointed look.

“Oh. Well, that sucks.” He pauses. “Can we have our food back?”

“No.” The person doesn’t even hesitate, leaning against the side table and crossing his arms. Then tenses up as Phil rests the blade of his axe gently between their shoulder blades. Tubbo smiles.

“I’d like our food back,” Phil says carefully. With slow care, the person’s hands go up in the air, fingers splayed out and after a minute, they turn around a bit. Phil doesn’t move the axe, letting it hang in the air between them. Closer now, he can see the faint twitch in their eyes as they stare at the blade, then glance back to where Tubbo’s leaning against the doorframe. Phil can tell they’re debating what to do here. “Make it easy,” he suggests. “We’re not asking for everything you have. Just what you took.”

There are footsteps on the stairs, then Tommy’s at the door as well. “Are you-” he begins, then catches a glimpse of everything that’s happening and adjusts his grip on his blade. Phil can see the moment the person in front of him realizes he’s probably fucked, their shoulders slipping down a bit. Phil... almost feels bad. But not really. There’s a stalemate for a moment, then the person slowly lowers their hands again.

“Fine,” they say, letting out a deep breath. “Fine. Sure. Your stuff back. You win.”

“Yay!” Tubbo pushes off the doorframe he’d been leaning on, practically skipping over to where Tommy is by the door. They fistbump, and Phil sighs. It’s not like they’ve gotten it back yet, after all.

“Come on,” Phil says, tipping his head toward the door, and the person hesitantly makes their way along. Phil stays behind, letting the two boys go first and keeping the mystery guy between them. He hasn’t gotten a good look at his face yet, due to the mask, and yet he can

tell from the tension in his shoulders that he's stressed as hell. Down three flights of stairs they go, mostly quiet for the moment.

Tubbo and Tommy stop by the front door, and Phil raises a brow.

"Let's go?" He says, and then he realizes why they've stopped. All four of them fall silent, staring out the small window of the door and unmoving.

Outside is a *sea* of deadwalkers.

"Holy shit," Tommy says quietly, barely above his breath. Phil lowers his axe gently, and all the plans in his head go out the window. None of them move, just staring as the shuffling dead walk past. They're all moving in the same direction- toward the center of town. Toward the others. In front of him, their masked hostage shifts and starts to turn.

"The roof," he whispers quietly to Phil, moving with a certain care. "Up."

"Yeah," Phil says in return, mouth dry. It's all he dares to say, shifting forward to snag Tommy and Tubbo's attention and gently draw them back from the door. Carefully, they all move backwards until they're out of sight of the door and the crowd, and then they all turn and go. Up the stairs, four flights, and Masky pushes open the door to the roof.

"What the fuck," Tommy says, staring down off the roof and at the dead walking. "What the fuck. What the fuck, what the fuck."

"They're migrating." There's shuffling from their new companion, and he tugs out a notebook from a pocket somewhere and moves to scribble something down. "I thought this might happen, but I wasn't sure when."

"Well, nice fucking timing," Tommy hisses, and Phil peers over the side of the roof carefully. There's probably about twenty-five of them at the moment, shuffling their way toward the huge mass of dead in the center of town. They're slow about it- some of them are missing limbs, a lot of them are decayed. Like they'd crawled out of spots where they'd been for a year or more.

"How are we supposed to get out?" Tubbo asks, his voice sort of shaky.

"They'll sprout in a few days, probably," says their companion, peeking over the edge along with the rest of them. "Once they've sprouted, they can't move anymore as far as I know. You could walk right through the center of the crowd. I have."

"We can't just stay up here for a few days," Phil points out. "We don't have any food, unless you have it with you."

"I don't."

"Wonder whose fault that is," Tommy mutters, and shoots a glare. He gets one in return and Phil is quick to step between them.

"No. We're not arguing now. If we all want to make it out of here, we're working together." He turns to face their new companion, tapping his fingers anxiously on the handle of his axe. "Is that alright?"

"I don't usually..." Phil watches as the guy trails off, eyes flicking from him to both Tommy and Tubbo, then he shifts to glance over the roof of the building. He sighs. "Alright, yeah. Fine."

"Good. We're going to try and stealth this," Phil says, ignoring Tommy's huff of annoyance. He forges on. "They're all focused on getting to the rest, it looks like, so if we're quiet and stay out of sight for the most part, then we should be able to sneak to wherever you hole up at night. Is that fine?"

"You want me to lead you right to my base?" The guy wrinkles his face up, leaning back. "No fucking way." Phil bites back the annoyed words he wants to spit out, instead settling for something more compromising. He doesn't want this guy to just run off after all, and leave the three of them behind in the dust.

"Just somewhere nearby?" He asks, and he can practically see the wheels turning again in the guy's head.

"...fine," he finally concedes, stepping over to look down again at the zombies below them. Phil does the same, checking to see where they all are. He almost jumps when the guy speaks. "We want to get across the street, then across the next. From there it's a straight shot across backyards, so it'll be safer."

"Okay." Phil nods, turning to Tommy and Tubbo. Below them are about twenty-five of the dead, shambling along. Phil doesn't think any of them will be quick enough to grab hold of them if they need to run, but he's not risking anything. "Tommy, you go first, behind him. Tubbo behind you, and I'll bring up the rear. Sound alright?"

The guy gives him a look, then shrugs nonchalantly. His whole demeanor has shifted somewhat, from being pissed off but meek into something a bit more dangerous. Phil notes how he's shifting his weight side to side. "Fine by me," he says, voice flat in tone or emotion. "Let's go before more show up."

"You think more are going to show up-?" Tommy sounds too excited for Phil's personal tastes, so he reaches out and taps him on the forehead as they all start to make their way back down the stairs.

"We don't want more to show up," he reminds him, watching Tommy's face wrinkle in surprise at his finger and the skin brushing against his own. In front of them, Tubbo's skipped a few steps in order to catch up to the thief.

"What's your name?" He asks brightly, and the entire stairway seems to hold its breath all at once. They're still moving, still quietly descending to the ground floor, but neither Tommy nor Phil are paying attention to each other anymore. The guy is quiet for a minute.

“Technoblade,” he finally answers, and Tommy bursts out laughing. Then covers his mouth with a hand, like he’s remembered why they were trying to be quiet in the first place. It earns him a glare from Technoblade, eyes flashing.

“What?” He snaps, staring up from the stairwell beneath them. “Too cool for you?”

“More like a fuckin’ weeb!” Tommy says once he’s recovered from the surprise laughter, and Phil has to take a moment to stop and cover his mouth as well. It is an amusing name, and Tommy is sort of right. “What are you, some sort of protagonist?”

“At least mine’s more interesting than Tommy. How fucking banal,” Technoblade says, holding his head up primly as he jumps down another flight of stairs. They all follow, and Phil can tell Tubbo’s grinning below his mask. The quip comes as expected.

“I think Tommy’s got the worst name out of all of us,” he teases, and Tommy goes bright red with rage. “I think Techno’s right! I can call you Techno, yeah?”

“Sure, do what you want.” Techno is deadpan.

“That is so not fair! Phil’s name is boring! It’s Phil! Short for Phillip, or something stupid like that!” Tommy turns backwards, taking a few steps down that way and tripping a bit before turning back around. Phil waits to roll his eyes until Tommy’s not looking at him, smirking a little.

“Yeah, but it can be cooler if we try. Like Phil...za. Philza. A little pep on the end!” Tubbo pipes up to defend him. Phil raises a brow. His name doesn’t need to be cool, what the hell?

“Philza?” Techno looks up at them again, and Phil snorts.

“You know, I kind of like it,” Phil says, just to hear Tommy turn into a tea kettle from rage. He’s still laughing as they reach the bottom floor finally, and then goes quiet. They all do as they remember what they’re coming down here for, and Tommy finally settles down a bit. They stand there for a moment, then Techno reaches up behind his shoulder and pulls out a sword. An honest-to-god sword. Phil doesn’t bother to question it, just tugging out his own axe and hearing the similar sounds as the boys each take out their own weapons.

“Remember,” Phil says, positioning the two younger boys in front of him like they’d talked about before. “We want to get out of here without having to fight anything, okay? Just be quiet and follow.” He receives two solemn nods in return, although he pins Tommy down with his eyes and hopes that it gets his message across-- *no funny business, no hero moves*. The last thing they need are all the dead out there to hear the commotion and come for their throats. They’re capable, but not capable enough to take on twenty-five of the suckers.

Techno opens the door.

Outside is quiet, but Phil can still hear shuffling and scraping. Techno peers out, then carefully steps outside. Tommy follows, then Tubbo, then Phil. He leaves the door open behind them. Thankfully, the dead have all shifted to the left side of the street, heading toward the center of town. There’s none to the right, so they can easily slip behind the small hoard and through the alleys. Phil’s relieved.

Tommy trips, a cuss leaving his mouth before he can stop it. He catches himself halfway through the fall, looking relieved and proud before he realizes exactly what he's done. Down the road to their left, one of the deadwalker's heads snaps backwards and either catches sight of them or smells them-- Phil thinks their eyeballs have long rotted away, only leaving hollows behind in their skulls. They move on instinct now, barreling down the street. For decayed human bodies, they move fast.

Techno moves faster. Phil is busy readying himself to swing when he realizes the other man has already stepped out and intercepted a zombie, watching a head roll slowly across the pavement. Ew.

"Guess we're fighting this one out," Techno calls across to him, and Phil just nods.

"Get to the other side of the street," he instructs Tommy and Tubbo, heaving his axe out and gratified to see the dead thing slump over, petrified innards spilling out and over the ground. "Go!" He gives them a second and watches them go, then turns back to the quick motherfuckers who are currently descending on him like vultures, eyes and heads twitching to follow his every movement. Fighting these things isn't fun-- it's not the most difficult thing anymore, but it's messy and disgusting and unpleasant. Phil takes out one or two and when he glances over to where Techno had been last, he sees probably a half dozen. All he has time to do is think *damn* before he's swinging his axe again and backing up, wincing at the squelch it makes as it meets flesh.

"Careful," someone says behind him, and Phil whirls around to see Techno there, a body impaled on a sword and eyes crinkled, like under his mask he's smiling. Breathless, Phil just nods his thanks and continues backing up, to where he'd seen Tommy and Tubbo run toward just a few moments ago. There's a slight crash from his left and he turns, catching sight of Tommy in the street, kicking aside a trash can from where he'd probably knocked it over. As if a whistle had been blown, all of the dead are suddenly moving toward the noise and in turn, Tommy.

"Shit," Phil says, and it's damn near in sync with Tommy's.

"Shit!" He says, glancing up and around and meeting Phil's eyes. Then he ducks, avoiding a swinging arm of one of the dead. Tubbo's farther back between buildings, Phil can see, so he heads up the street to interfere. Tommy's taken care of the one zombie that had made it to him, so Phil takes precious seconds to dispose of two deadwalkers that had managed to crawl his way. In those moments, something happens, and when he glances up Tommy's distracted, trying to pull his machete out of the body of one of the dead. Behind him comes another, fingers and teeth reaching out towards bare arms and skin with dreadful intention.

"Behind you!!!"

Phil can hear the panic in Tubbo's voice, mirroring his own inner thoughts as Tommy wrenches himself backwards and right into a walker's grasp.

"Tommy!" The shout is frightened and scared and worst of all, coming from right behind Phil. He throws his arm out but it's already too late, Tubbo having seen it coming and ducking under. He's moving fast, fast enough that he gets to Tommy before Techno can turn

around, and slamming him sideways. Tommy falls onto the pavement, the clatter of metal ringing in Phil's ears as he darts forward to follow in a panic.

Tubbo's screaming. One of his arms-- clothed, thank god-- has a zombie hanging off of it, it's rotted and decayed jaw grasping onto his skin and fabric like a deranged animal. The screaming cuts short when something goes squelch, and Phil pulls his axe out of the thing's side before he can really process what he's doing. It lets go in favor of coming toward him instead, which turns out to be a bad fucking move as Phil slams his axe directly onto it's head, splitting the skull down the center and making the rest of it's body go still. They're finally quiet for a moment, the only sound their heavy panting, then Tommy's shouting and Techno's there too and Phil is grabbing Tubbo's arm with a panic.

"I'm fine! I'm fine!" Tubbo's words go faintly in one ear and out the other as Phil looks over his arm, inspecting every bit of torn fabric for blood. There's a lot of congealed, old, dried bits, but nothing too fresh. The skin under his sleeve seems to be unbroken. Tommy is babbling somewhere on the other side of Tubbo, and Phil only tunes in once he's determined that everything's fine. Dragging a hand down his face, he drops the arm in his grasp and shuts his eyes.

"Motherfucker," he exhales. "Never do that again."

"I'm fine," Tubbo repeats weakly, and Tommy slams his forehead onto Tubbo's shoulder loud enough for Phil to wince. He does it again.

"I hate you," Tommy says a second later, and there's a hand on Phil's shoulder that makes him jump and remember right, there's a fourth person here. He turns, grimacing a bit at the mess they've made that's now littering the street.

"Thanks for cleaning up," Phil says, glancing back at Tubbo and then at Techno again, wary. Some people get weird about close calls, and Phil's seen enough of Techno's brutal efficiency while dealing with the dead to think that he also might be one of those types. When Phil looks around the street, there are a dozen or so bodies lying around that he didn't even remember seeing Techno take care of. He'd just done it, and as he wipes the blade of his sword off and sheathes it there's almost an elegance to his familiarity with it. A terrifying elegance. Thankfully in regards to Tubbo, all the other does is peer forward a bit and wrinkle his nose. Phil doesn't think he could take him in a fight.

"Glad he's alright," he says, shifting his weight backwards again and turning toward the sidewalk. "We should go, though." Phil agrees (he agrees so much, holy shit), so he gives Tommy and Tubbo one last moment (and himself, just needing the space to breathe) before urging them onwards. He half expected Techno to run off in the midst of all that chaos, and yet he follows along after a moment anyways.

They end up at Technoblade's base, which Phil isn't really expecting. Techno's base isn't really a base. It's a base-ment, yes, but it's bare bones at best. It's no surprise when Techno hands them a bag of their food back from a small bin under a counter, the occasional notebook making an appearance around the room. It's something of a surprise when Techno accepts a part of the food Phil offers back, and Phil's not expecting Techno to say yes when Tubbo asks if he'd like some company for a while.

Although, maybe, looking around the bare, lonely space, maybe it's not all that much of a surprise.

Later that night, when Phil is asleep and Techno is somewhere in his base and Tommy's curled up on the floor next to him, Tubbo turns his arm over in his hands and sneaks a couple bandages from their medkit to slap onto the scrapes from the zombie's teeth that he'd managed to cover up before Phil had gotten to his arm and looked at it.

"Why'd you do that?" Tommy asks from beside him, having woken up when their blankets had shifted but not bothered him until now. Tubbo breathes in through his nose and out through his teeth, extending his arm carefully before bringing it back toward his body. He's going to have to wear long sleeves until they heal up.

"Because," Tubbo says, because. Because he's not sure what else to say.

"It was stupid," Tommy says after a minute.

"You're stupid." Tubbo doesn't hesitate to fire it back, and then a moment later the floodgates break. "You threw yourself into that fight and had no regard for your surroundings, idiot. I wouldn't have *had* to do it if I hadn't seen you- if you hadn't—" He trails off, both of them listening quietly as Phil shuffles next to them. Still asleep, based on the rise and fall of his chest.

"Do you think he'd be mad if he knew we were hiding it?" Tommy asks a second later, not even bothering to respond to Tubbo's little rant from a moment ago. "He'd have to worry less about you." That sits heavy on Tubbo's mind for a minute, and then he shrugs.

"I'll tell him someday," he says, although he feels like he's lying without consciously doing so. "Maybe. Probably. Someday." The topic of his immunity hadn't come up at all in conversation recently, although before they'd met Phil some days it was all they could talk about. They'd sit in some quiet corner and think back, babbling about it. *It* being the day back when it all started, when Tubbo sported a bleeding shoulder and they sobbed quietly together in Tubbo's parent's basement and waited for it all to end. How it never did.

The scars still burn, some days.

"Whenever you want to, Big T." Tommy's voice is getting heavier with sleep, and Tubbo shifts to lie down again beside him. The day had been exhausting, and it's comforting to know they're in a relatively safe place for the night, even if Techno had up and disappeared. As long as they were together, Tubbo reckoned, nothing could go truly wrong. "Night."

"Night, Tommy."

Techno fits in quite well with their little team.

They leave his base after a few days, waiting for the town to settle above them. They scavenge what they can but don't stay too much longer, all of them wanting to get out of the suffocating oddness that the town radiates. Techno explains to them that he'd been trying to study the deadwalkers for a while now, watching them come together and sprout, taking notes about their movements and growth. He calls it a hyperfixation-- Phil calls it some sort of genius. The way he talks about it reminds him of when Tubbo explains how he does math inside his head. Other than that, Techno's nice. He's quiet, but when he does speak it's often worth listening to. Either in the way of dry humor or serious suggestion, it's worth paying attention to. He and Tommy argue more often than not, while Tubbo trails along after him rambling about things that they both share an interest in. Phil and Techno are the ones who stay up late, and it's nice to share the responsibility with someone instead of having it all on his shoulders. While Techno's young, he's mature and knows how to survive on his own, so Phil has no problem trusting him to take a watch during the night so they can both get some sleep in shifts. It also helps that he's seen Techno take down two deadwalkers in one hit- it adds a bit of security to the situation for sure.

Winter is coming, however, and as much as Phil likes having Techno with them, he is another mouth to feed and another body to keep warm. He finds himself up late many nights, sitting and counting the days until the most likely first snow. He keeps an eye out for animals as they walk through the woods, keeps an eye out for anything edible at all. They avoid towns and settlements as much as possible, knowing what probably lies in the center, and instead loot isolated houses the best they can. Their supplies take sharp declines on occasion, and it worries Phil. It worries him a lot. It worries him more than he ever lets them know. He can tell that they know, of course, but never the *extent* to which he worries. Never how it keeps him up at night, never how often he carefully checks through each of their bags and thinks about their rations.

Eventually, he knows they have to stop. Techno knows it too, evidenced by how he slows down one day in the woods. The weather's gotten chillier, and Phil's thinking about jackets. Mostly for Tommy and Tubbo, since Phil's jacket is good for a while and Techno has his layers from the town.

"We need to find a place to stay," Techno says, trailing alongside Phil as they both watch the boys ahead of them dart between trees. "Before it snows."

"I know," Phil says, stepping carefully over a log and then uses a stone to boost himself over another. Techno follows suit.

"A house would be best," Techno points out, and Phil takes a deep breath.

"I know," he repeats, and he can tell Techno's getting a bit exasperated by his lack of response.

“Are we going to, then?” He asks, and Phil stops in his tracks. He looks around, gesturing with one arm, and his words come out sharper than he originally intended.

“Do you see a house, Techno? Feel free to shout when you do, and we’ll stop.”

Up ahead, the clamor from Tommy and Tubbo has quieted. They’re listening, obviously, and Phil takes a moment to breathe. After a moment, Techno forges ahead and brushes past Phil. He holds his head high, moving forward and into the woods further. Phil follows.

They keep walking, the mood somber. Even Tommy and Tubbo return to them, eyes flicking between the two older men and then looking at each other. Phil pretends not to notice their hands clasped together, and Techno is so far ahead of them at this point he probably hadn’t noticed at all even if he wanted to make fun of the two. It’s starting to get dark and Phil’s contemplating stopping to make camp when Techno reappears out of the trees, coming back in their direction.

“I found a place,” he says, chin high and eyes determined. Phil stares right back at him, grey eyes meeting brown, and doesn’t argue. Instead, he lets him lead the way.

The house isn’t perfect. It’s aged and overgrown (like everything else in the world) and the street it’s on has a few other houses around it. There’s clearly a town in the distance, but Phil is so fucking exhausted that he says nothing about it and settles them in for the night. He lets Tommy and Tubbo both split what’s left of their green beans, and says nothing when Techno rolls out his blankets on the couch and lets Phil have the bedroom.

In the morning, he leaves the two younger boys to sleep in. He’s up early, not having slept much the night before, and Techno shuffles outside awake a little after he does, bleary and quiet. Phil sits on the stairs of the front porch, and they’re quiet for a while as they watch the world wake up. The sun rises, banishing the chilly cold from the air for the most part. When Phil starts to hear noise from inside the house they’d claimed, evidence of Tommy waking up Tubbo, that’s when he speaks.

“We’ll stay,” he says, and Techno stiffens a bit beside him. Like he hadn’t been expecting him to speak at all. “Here.”

“Are you sure?” Techno asks, and Phil presses his hand to his forehead, rubbing at the space in between his eyes where the pressure’s often the worst. He’s never sure of anything anymore, his head spinning with possibilities and worries and stress and anger, but he doesn’t say that. No, he can’t.

“I’m sure,” is what he says instead, staring at the sun until his eyes burn. “Unless one of those houses across the street has more than two bedrooms.”

Techno laughs out loud for the first time, and Phil feels some small part of himself relax.

They do end up relocating. Tubbo discovers a hole in the upstairs floor when he nearly falls through it, and Techno comes back from scouting with a report that one of the houses across the street is in much better shape and has three bedrooms, more than enough if Tommy and Tubbo were willing to share. (Of course they were- they couldn't sleep if not together, Phil knows.) So they roll up their blankets and pack their things for the last time, hopefully. At least until next spring.

Phil finds it hard to stay in one place. He keeps himself busy, of course, claiming a bedroom as his own and clearing it to make it more comfortable. The sheets are dusty and he enlists Tubbo's help to do laundry, dragging a bag of dirty things to a stream across the street and down a small embankment. Using years-old detergent, Phil scrubs the sweat and grime of traveling out of his clothes and the dust out of sheets until his hands are numb and raw. Tubbo helps without complaint, instead filling the silence with things he plans to do. Phil suggests a to-do list, and watches as Tubbo's eyes glint with ideas. They leave the sheets out to dry on the front porch, crisp and white and blowing gently in the breeze like flags. Phil panics only slightly when Tommy and Techno return slightly bloody from checking the area around (that is to say, he nearly has a heart attack and collapses until he realizes the wound is a scrape and not a bite).

"There was a dead guy stuck in the drain," Tommy explains as Tubbo wraps their gauze around his arm, just enough to cover the wound a few times and hold it in place. "Thing grabbed my ankle and I fell."

"Then I cut it's arm off," Techno jumps in, and Phil resists the urge to bang his head against the wall. Other than the one trapped deadwalker, however, they see no sign of any other monsters. Their street is empty. Phil fills their days with work, helping Tommy and Tubbo with their to-do list- he keeps them close to the house they've claimed (the one he refuses to think of as a home quite yet) and keeps the workload heavy so they sleep well at night. They board up the houses around them, so nothing can get in or out. They scavenge as they go, taking whatever they can and stockpiling it in their living room- Tommy and Tubbo finally sport winter coats that somewhat fit them, with gloves and scarves waiting in the living room for when they're needed. Clothing is a godsend that Phil takes happily, any sort of fabric coming back and piling up in their closets and extra space in the house. Before long, it almost seems cluttered with the sheer amount of things Phil has found and thought to be somewhat useful, or just simply wanted to take for the sake of taking. Techno scavenges with them as well, but after some time heads out on his own to look around and explore the area surrounding them. He doesn't go into town. Instead, he goes into the woods, and often enlists Tommy to come out and help get firewood, stacking it in the backyard and covering it with a tarp. By the end of the first week, there's so much there that there's not enough tarp and Techno chooses to store what's left on one side of the kitchen. They talk about plans for the winter over their meals after the sun goes down, about food and supplies and rationing. It's a major worry of Phil's, but Techno says one night for him to not to chew on his nails as much as he does with a strange glint in his eye. The next day, he starts bringing back as many birds as he can possibly carry. Phil's somewhat surprised, and he recognizes a few of them, but Tubbo seems to be the most knowledgeable about their species.

"This is ptarmigan," he explains, poking the bird Techno had brought back that day. "People used to eat it, actually. All the time."

"Well, we're eating it now," Phil says, taking its limp body from where Techno had tossed it in the kitchen. He really needs to not do that, Phil thinks. "Come on. Let's learn how to gut a bird."

Tubbo does not like that part, it turns out. Phil lets him go after he turns a particular shade of green.

Food is something he *still* worries about. Yes, Techno brings things back more often than not, but Phil knows wildlife all but disappears during the winter. He rations their meals carefully, placing more and more food aside as the days go by. Tommy discovers an overgrown garden a few streets over and despite the fact many of the vegetables and plants have gone out of season already, they take what they can get. Phil doesn't know a ton about storing food like this, so he does his best with cooking and then packaging it all up, clearing out the old fridge and scrubbing it until it's clean enough to actually put food in again, despite the fact the electricity is gone. The fireplace in the front room becomes the main kitchen, with the regular kitchen just used for storage. It's easier to keep heat in the living room, so Phil tucks up a blanket in the door between the kitchen and hallway and they all tend to end up sleeping in the living room instead of the bedrooms they'd claimed as it gets colder, and colder.

One morning, Phil wakes up later than normal. The room is quiet, the fire from last night having burnt down to embers and left the air around them chilly. To his left, he can see the slight rise and fall of Techno's chest. When he shifts to the right, Tommy and Tubbo are but lumps under their blankets. The world is quiet and soft, and the light coming in through the windows shines down on his head in an odd muted tone. After taking a moment to sit up and feel the chill in the air, Phil slips his socks on and then pushes his way into the kitchen. It's even colder in there, and when he opens the back door he can clearly see why. Snow coats the ground in a thin but even layer, the sky grey with the promise of more. Despite the serenity of it all, dread rises in the pit of his stomach.

He sits on the back doorstep for a while, until he hears the rustling of someone waking up, and moves to go back in.

Tommy and Tubbo are delighted by the snow. They don boots and too-large jackets and gloves and scarves and kick around in the few centimeters of white fluff until it's nothing but slush. Techno refuses to engage- that is, until a handful of grimy, muddy muck is thrown his way. From there it's an all out war, which Phil is unfortunately dragged into. By the end, however, he's laughing, worries pushed to the back of his mind as he ducks behind the tower of firewood to avoid a slush-ball hitting him and making the mess worse. The water from the stream is freezing when they eventually haul a bucket of it back to the house, using it to rinse themselves off, but Phil thinks maybe it's a little worth it to see the flush on their cheeks and ruddy smiles, breathless from laughing.

Snow is.. weird, where they are.

Before everything happened, back when Phil lived in a warm flat during the winter and Tommy and Tubbo had parents and school and lives, and Techno was in America, it didn't really snow. Sure, they had slush and the occasional few inches, and ice as well, but snow was hardly ever something they had to worry about. But as the years passed after the disease started, Phil had found the winters to be less and less forgiving. It started out small, with it getting colder a little earlier. The animals were off as well, Phil seeing wildlife in the middle of hoards of deadwalkers or even just in the wrong season. Then came the rainstorms in the early spring and late summer, like they had months ago before they'd met Techno. Phil can still remember the warm humidity, how the water stuck to his skin and how their clothes never felt dry at all. Snow seems to be the icing on top of their shitty cake, a perfect white reminder that things are different now. Now, the snow falls for days in huge white flakes, six points and symmetrical as Tubbo points out. Now, the snow piles up on the road and in their backyard to the point where Phil has to clear a path to the firewood and back. Eventually, it drifts to be taller than even those stacks. When they bother to measure, it's at least four feet.

Tommy and Tubbo like it at first. So does Techno, sort of. Phil can even find it pretty. But sooner than later, the novelty wears off. It snows nearly every other day and blue skies are infrequent. The world is a gloomy, grey mess of white powder and cold and Phil is tired of it before it even really gets bad.

They're stuck inside for the most part, not having to go outside other than to collect a bucket of snow for water or get more firewood to keep the living room warm. It's where they stay most days, Tubbo working through a sudoku book commonly while Tommy prods and pokes and whines and complains. Phil lended him the book he'd finished a week prior, but it only shut him up for so long. Techno writes, nose buried in a notebook that he refuses to let Tommy read no matter how much the younger pesters him.

It's only a matter of time until one of them snaps.

Surprisingly, it's not Techno or Tommy or even Phil.

“Will you quit it!” Tubbo throws down the small booklet he'd been obsessed with over the past few days, and Phil jumps from where he'd been dozing on the couch, feet in Techno's lap. Pulled awake, the older two can only watch as Tommy stares in surprise. “I can't move two *inches* without you finding something about me to pick on, and I'm sick of it! I just want to do my numbers without you trying to distract me, or bully me!” Phil can see the surprise slide off of Tommy's face, quickly replaced with anger. Shit. He and Techno share a glance.

“Boys-” he calls out, but it's already too late.

“If you weren't so fucking boring I wouldn't have to bully you, would I?” Tommy shoots back, voice dripping with sarcasm and hurt. “Oh, I'm Tubbo. Oh, I like numbers. Look at me, I'm so smart. Phil, see how much I know? Oh, oh, oh, I'm so helpful and nice! I don't have a personality beyond that!” Phil slips his feet out of Techno's lap and onto the floor, already

moving before Tubbo shoves the blanket off his own lap and launches himself at Tommy with fury and upset clearly plastered on his face.

Phil's quick, and Techno follows him as soon as he sees the fight start, but both of the teenagers manage to get a few hits in despite their reaction times. Phil pushes Tommy back, while Techno carefully places himself in front of Tubbo, blocking them from finishing what they were trying to start.

“You’re a dick!” Tubbo cries, hiccuping slightly as he says it and tears mixing with the bloody nose he’s now sporting. Phil winces, turning to Tommy and looking him over. Bruised knuckles and a busted spot above his eyebrow, leaking blood into his eye. God fucking dammit.

“You fucking started it!” Tommy shouts back, and Phil finally raises his voice.

“Enough!” He shouts, watching as both their gazes snap from each other to him. “Fucking enough. Tommy, come with me. Techno—”

“Yeah, I got it.” Techno doesn’t let Phil finish, eyes firmly on Tubbo beneath him. “Lemme see your face, kid.” Phil urges Tommy backwards, out of the living room and into the small, cold kitchen. He doesn’t stick around to hear what Techno says, instead just focusing on Tommy and sitting him down on one of the chairs they keep empty. Tommy’s shaking, fists curled still and fingernails biting into his palms as he sits there. Absently, his knee bounces. Once Phil’s sure he’s not going to run right back into the other room, he snags a towel from a stack they keep in the corner and presses it to just under Tommy’s eye. Another towel goes to his hand, probably soothing it just with temperature alone.

“That was stupid,” Tommy grits out after a minute of silence, and Phil sighs.

“It was,” he agrees, letting go of the towel slightly. “Hold this.” Tommy reaches up with his unbruised hand, gently pressing the towel onto the place where his skin had split.

“Are you mad at me?” Tommy asks, then rephrases. “Us?”

“No,” Phil admits, because he’s not. It’s been a tense few weeks, stuck in the house, and he knew the spats they’d all been having would lead up to something like this. “I’m not. I’m frustrated too, Tommy. We all are. It’s hard not being able to keep busy, stuck like this.”

“I feel like I’m going fucking insane.” Tommy grimaces when Phil pulls the towel away slightly, to check if it’s bleeding still. It is, but at least it won’t get any worse. And it’s smaller than he thought- head wounds always look worse when they’ve just happened. A band aid would suffice just fine, Phil thinks.

“I know,” he says, pressing the towel down again and smiling a bit when Tommy spits out a frustrated curse. “We’ll work on it. We’ll start going out- even with the snow. Or we can try and find something to do upstairs. You can help me try and figure out how to woodwork, if you want.”

“What, like building shelves?” Tommy looks up at him, and Phil nods.

“Sure. Or carve little things. It involves using a knife and your hands, so it’s better than sitting and doing nothing, right?” It had been an idea he’d had a few days ago, and they certainly had knives. And wood. Those were the two things Phil was sure they’d never run out of, so why not put them both to good use? Tommy seems intrigued, especially when Phil brings up the knife bit, and he doesn’t say no. He just twists his mouth to the side, staring off at the blanket that separates the kitchen and living room. If he listens just right, Phil can hear the low voices of Techno and Tubbo coming through it. But he doesn’t.

“I didn’t mean to make his nose bleed,” Tommy says after a minute of silence, and Phil reaches out to gently ruffle his hair.

“I know,” he repeats for what feels like the millionth time. “Apologize, once we get you cleaned up. Okay?” Tommy ducks his head some, knocking Phil’s hand off his head and pressing the towel harder on his forehead.

“He technically started it,” Tommy points out, and Phil just gives him a look. He can remember being a teenager, and while his circumstances were entirely different, he knows that Tommy can tell he understands at least a little. He seems to deflate then, shrugging. “Fine.”

“Okay.” Phil takes a deep breath, then nods. “Okay, mate. Sit here, I’m going to go grab something for your head.” Tommy nods slightly, and Phil ducks his way through the blanket door and back into the living room. Techno and Tubbo are quiet now, the blood mostly gone from Tubbo’s face but there’s a few spots in the carpet and he’s pinching his nose with a wince. Phil takes a bandaid from the first aid kit- already open on and on the couch- giving Techno a nod before heading back to Tommy. He gently pulls the towel away from his forehead, staying quiet as Tommy curses lightly when he wipes to clear the rest of the blood away before it dries. The cut is smaller than he’d thought before, so the bandaid fits neatly over the spot and Tommy stops with the swears. They sit there for another minute, then Phil gives him a pointed glance toward the blanket and living room.

“Fuck you,” Tommy says bitterly, then moves to get up and rubs at his nose with the uninjured hand. “Fine.”

Phil follows as Tommy pushes his way through the doorway and into the other room, silence falling over them all as the two teens stare at each other. Tommy glances Tubbo up and down for a second, then looks down at his socks and shuffles them in the carpet a bit. Tubbo’s gaze seems to be square on his face, fingers still clutching his nose.

“Sorry-”

“Tommy, I’m sorry-” They both start and stop, glancing at each other again, and then Tommy snorts a little.

“Your voice is all nasally,” he says, and Tubbo sits there for a moment. Phil almost thinks he’s going to get angry again, but then he breaks out into a smile below his hand.

“Yeah, no thanks to you. Techno says it’s not broken.” That’s a relief. Phil sees Tommy’s shoulders slump a bit as well, and he moves to go sit on the couch once more. Techno follows

suit, plopping down and giving him a look. Phil returns it kindly.

“Well, I didn’t want to mess up your fugly face more than it already is-”

“Hey!”

“Kidding, sorry . Sorry.” Phil lets the *good-natured* bickering wash over him like a balm, and Techno absently messes with a section of his own hair as he watches them go back and forth. Phil thinks maybe haircuts should be added to his to-do list. They all look shaggy, and Techno’s roots are growing in. Phil wonders if he’s got any dye left, since the other had insisted on keeping his hair pink as long as possible.

“Tommy alright?” Techno asks after a couple minutes of listening to them make up, voice low and casual enough for Phil to know he wants mild privacy during this conversation. He nods.

“Yeah. Physically *and* emotionally, I think.”

“I don’t think any of us are emotionally ‘all right’, Phil.” Techno drops the small braid from his fingers in order to put air quotes around the words, huffing lightly.

“Fair point,” Phil concedes, propping his feet back up into Techno’s lap where they’d been before this whole thing started. “Fair point.”

Techno goes outside more often than any of them. He disappears early in the morning and doesn’t come back some days until the sun is nearly setting and Phil is biting his nails down to the cuticle with anxiety. Occasionally he comes back with things- sometimes it’ll be useless little items, things he hands over to its respective recipient and says nothing else about. Sometimes it’s food, cold cans of various items and once, a bag of rice. The occasional spice bottle. These little food presents come less and less, but Techno still goes out. Sometimes he’ll bring Tommy or Tubbo with him, or both, and they never stay out as long those days. Phil prefers to stay in the house, whittling wood down into shapes that get more and more recognizable.

One night, after Tommy and Tubbo have fallen asleep in a pile and the fire has gotten low, Techno pulls his backpack over and motions for Phil to come look. Inside are some ribbons, the kinds you’d find in a party store, still in their package.

“What are these for?” Phil asks quietly as he turns them over in his hands, making sure to not wake up the younger two. Techno shrugs.

“Found them in someone’s kitchen drawers. Thought we could spice up the place for Christmas.”

Christmas. A holiday. Right. Phil had honestly forgotten, and he knows it shows on his face when Techno gives him a little lopsided grin, and teases. “Did you forget?”

“Maybe. Shut up,” Phil says, turning the red and green ribbons over in his hands. “I haven’t celebrated since this all started.”

“Maybe it’s time we do,” Techno says, zipping his bag up and letting Phil hide the ribbons somewhere else, where they’ll take up less space. He thinks on that for a while, staring at the fire until it’s almost nothing and finally getting up to put more wood on. Christmas.

There’s no way to tell what day it really is, so Phil chooses a random day in the middle of the cold. He digs out more rations than usual, Techno taking both Tommy and Tubbo out into the snow for a bit to give him time to prepare. Up go the ribbons, decorating the living room in festive color, and Phil raids the mostly-untouched hall closet in the house for any other decorations. There are a few, which he places with care. Sat in the bottom of the box labeled “christmas” in scrawled sharpie is a picture frame. He lifts it out with care, unwrapping the faded newspaper from around the gaudy reindeer and Santa frame and stares. A family looks back up at him- a father with a beard, a petite mother and two little girls standing in front of them. They’re all dressed up in winter clothing, staring at the camera with bright smiles and happy faces.

Quietly, Phil wraps the frame back up and puts it back into the box. Then back into the closet in the hallway. He heads back to the living room they’ve claimed as their own and continues wrapping the hastily-prepared gifts.

By the time Techno comes back, Tommy and Tubbo in tow, Phil’s mostly done. There’s still some time before the soup he’d attempted to make would be fully done, but that’s alright. There are things to do beforehand. Tommy shoves his way into the kitchen first and stomps the snow off his pants, grinning, cheeks flushed.

“I can’t believe you!” Tubbo shouts from outside, and his hair is painted white with snow. Tommy just laughs, tugging his gloves off and throwing them onto the tiles. Phil- who’s poked his head out of the living room by this point and is watching them now- gives him a look.

“Put your wet shit in the bin,” he chides, and Tommy rolls his eyes but goes to do so anyways. Tubbo and Techno take more time to brush themselves off outside, coming in and continuing to rid themselves of the warm layers. Phil waits, meeting Techno’s gaze with a small smile.

“What’s going on?” Tubbo asks, having caught the exchanged look. Phil shrugs, holding back a grin and watches as Tommy and Tubbo share a hesitant look. Tommy pulls off his boot, hopping onto his feet and trying to dance over the piles of snow they’d tracked in and keep

his socks dry. Phil moves to the side, Tommy just missing barreling into him as he bounces through the blanket doorway and into the living room with no small amount of curiosity.

“What?” He asks, sounding slightly surprised. Phil turns, leaning against the wall and letting the grin out as Tommy raises a hand, poking one of the red ribbons Phil had hung from the ceiling. Tubbo races in, having pulled off his own boots in a hurry to see.

“Christmas!” He exclaims, spinning around in a circle and immediately spotting the small bundle of branches (it sort of looked like a tree, if you turned your head right) Phil had propped up in the corner. “It’s Christmas! How did you know?”

“We didn’t,” Techno says, coming into the room and heading toward the fireplace to hold his hands out, working the stiffness out of them. “Phil just picked a random day and told me to distract you two so he could set it up.”

“Are these for us?” Tommy asks, having found the small packages under the tree, wrapped in fabric and tied with twine. Phil nods- there are three gifts there, all from him.

“But we didn’t know,” Tubbo says, immediately going over to pick one of the presents up and look at it. “We didn’t get you guys anything.”

“Think of it as an I-O-U,” Techno says dryly, and Phil whaps him on the shoulder lightly.

“Can we open them?” Tubbo asks excitedly, setting down the one he’d picked up in favor of finding the one with his name on it. Tommy is doing the same, holding the little package with an odd expression on his face. Phil doesn’t choose to comment, instead going over and nodding.

“If you want, yes. That’s why I wrapped them in the first place. So they’re able to be opened.”

“I didn’t wrap mine,” Techno says, sitting on the couch now and digging through his bag. “Suck it up.”

“Killjoy,” Tommy teases, but he doesn’t refuse the present when offered. Techno hands him a small bundle of cool metal, and Tommy immediately starts to flick parts of it open. It’s a multi-tool pocket knife by the looks of it, and Tommy instantly locks on to the ‘knife’ bit and holds it out in front of himself, slashing a bit at the air. Techno gives him a *wide* berth as he tosses Tubbo his gift, something soft and yellow and round, and then Phil gets his. It’s a series of books, but that’s not the important part.

“There’s a library, on the other side of town,” Techno explains. Phil brightens immediately. “It’s in shambles for the most part, but there’s some salvageable stuff. Give me ideas of what you want and I’ll bring it back, or we can go together sometime.”

“Thank you, Techno.” Phil smiles, running his fingers over the pages carefully and mindlessly watching as Tubbo and Tommy play around with their presents from Techno. He’d been raiding the upstairs bedrooms for literature to stave off the boredom for the past few weeks-- the discovery of a library is wonderful. Not to mention, the things they could

learn if the right books were still there. It's a good gift. They all are, and Phil's so intensely grateful that Techno had decided to stay with them in this moment.

The sound of ripping paper tears him from his thoughts, and he glances up to see Tommy tearing away at the brown paper he'd wrapped the gifts from him in.

"Tommy!" He says, laughing a little as he takes the package from his hands despite mild protest. "That's Tech's. Learn to read. This is yours," he hands over the small square, "and this one's for you." Tubbo takes his with a smile, and Phil sits himself down and makes sure he's paying attention while they all open it.

He's decided on more sudoku for Tubbo, a taped-together booklet he'd made himself out of whatever remaining magazines and newspapers he could find. Inside of that is another little piece of paper, one that Tubbo holds up to his face and scrutinizes for a moment as he sounds out the words. Then he breaks out into a grin, then laughter. "I've got a coupon!" He shouts, leaning over into Tommy's space and shoving it in his face. "For a Tommy-free day!"

"What!" Tommy's indignant, abandoning his unwrapping ventures in order to snag the coupon and peer at it. "What the hell, Phil!"

"You've got one too," Phil points out, holding back his laughter. "For a Tubbo-free day. Both of you can redeem it at any time."

"This is bullshit, I'm never using mine," Tommy proclaims loudly, and Techno snorts from his seat in the corner.

"Clingy," he teases, and Tommy reaches out to snag up his new pocket knife.

"Watch it, bitch boy, I'll stab you," he warns, mimicking the motion with the blade. Phil reaches out, waving a hand in the air in front of his face to catch his attention.

"Actually, you've got a present to open," he reminds him, and Tommy glances down as if he'd forgotten. Under the paper is a small mechanical device-- rare these days. Phil had found it earlier in the year, digging through one of the attics around them. It didn't have any batteries at the time, but there were plenty of tapes of oldies music that he had grabbed along with it just in case they found the right kind of batteries. And they had, months later. Phil had decided to save it for a special occasion, and this definitely counts as one in his mind. The thing is old enough and rare enough that Tommy turns it over in his hands like he has no idea what to do with it; the only thing he seems to recognize are the earbuds, which he puts into his ears after a moment and frowns.

"What is it?" He asks, and Phil points to the play button.

"Hit that," he instructs, and Tommy dutifully does. A minute later, they all can hear the tinny sounds of music escaping from his ears. Tommy still looks confused and for a moment, Phil wonders if he'd picked the wrong thing to give him, but then he smiles. It's not a normal Tommy smile, big and loud and proud. No, this one's smaller. The smile that Tommy usually reserves for when he thinks it's just Tubbo and him, or by himself.

“Thanks, Phil,” he says after a second, figuring out the pause button after a second and tugging the headphones out. Phil grins.

“Welcome, mate. Share it sometimes, yeah?”

“Yeah, alright.” Tommy’s fiddling with the machine now, enough so that Phil can turn his attention over to Techno. He’s already opened the present and seemingly inspected it based on how it’s just sitting in his lap now. Tubbo and Tommy ignore them in favor of messing with the buttons and trying to figure out the earbuds, and Phil’s grateful for the relative quiet. He nods down to the jacket that’s lying in his lap. It’s red, a fuzzy collar and the lining inside made of soft white fabric that Phil had ripped off of some carpet a house or two over.

“I thought you could use a change from the usually dingy color scheme,” he teases, watching as Techno runs his hands absently over the soft collar.

“Wow, thanks,” he deadpans, lifting the jacket up a bit and eyeing it. “Did you make this thing from scratch?”

“I just relined it and put the red on the outside. So, no,” Phil explains, reaching out to show him a few spots where the original coat managed to shine through. He’s not the best at sewing, but he’s by far the most competent at the skill out of all of them. “But it’s different.”

“I like it,” Techno admits, setting it down again in his lap. His fingers never leave the soft fuzz. “Also, thanks for the coupon.” He holds up a scrap of paper identical to Tubbo and Tommy’s the words scrawled across it declaring a coupon for one child-free day. They grin at each other for a minute, holding back the laughter as much as they can before finally Phil cracks, letting out a huff of amused air and hiccuping slightly.

“You’re welcome, mate,” he says as Techno chuckles, both of them glancing back to where Tommy and Tubbo are sitting, eyes locked on the tape deck and music quiet and tinny but there. It mixes with the sound of the fire, crackling in its corner, and the soft pops of the wood as it burns and chars. The room is warm and full of color, their dinner making the air smell like vegetables and food and something hearty to fill their stomachs. Christmas ends with them bundling up for bed, laughing and happy and no tension between them as they listen to the sounds of the wind outside. Winter might not be so bad if they can have days like this, Phil thinks, staring at the blacked-out window and still smiling, even as he dozes off.

As with all things, winter does come to an end.

Chapter End Notes

this was so long. 37 fucking pages in my google docs. i hope it's worth it :)

not to spoil, but next chapter the sleepy bois will be fully reunited. i promise

NOW WITH SOME POG FUCKING FANART: [THANK YOU!](#)

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It's a day halfway into spring when Wilbur happens.

The snow melted for the most part, some little piles remaining on the grass and in the streets, dingy against the world. The trees have nearly started budding, however, and Phil can practically taste the warmth in the air. They're all desperate to be out of the house after the claustrophobic nightmare that was winter, and Phil doesn't try to stop them one bit as long as they're cautious. Tommy and Tubbo explore the neighborhood again and again, tracking mud and dirt all over the place and carving their names into every surface they see. When Phil goes out, sometimes he'll spot the letters and smile, knowing that they've been there before. He goes out by himself for the most part, walking down the streets and occasionally entering houses, but mostly just going in circles and humming to himself as the sun shines down. Everything's started to settle down, and Phil can't help but think about moving again.

If he was by himself, he'd already be gone. He'd have been gone the minute the snow had melted enough and the nights had gotten a tad bit warmer. But he's not by himself anymore, and they've created this sort of space for themselves that Phil can't bring himself to leave just yet. Not to mention, packing would be a chore with all the things they've gathered. Phil wouldn't want to leave any of it behind, and he knows none of the others would too. There's still an itch under his fingers however, remnants from when things had been more desperate in the past and from when Phil had constantly had to have been on the move to survive. He knows they all feel it, in some capacity. Tommy and Tubbo are fidgety, Techno disappears most days, and Phil himself is absent from their house for long stretches of time as he walks.

But at the same time, Techno always comes home before the sun goes down. Tommy and Tubbo claim a bedroom upstairs as their own now that they don't all need to sleep near the fire to stay warm, and when Phil passes one day he sees them arguing about decorating the damn thing, piles of clothes and sheets on the floor that they'd accumulated like it was their real bedroom, like they were planning on staying forever.

Maybe they could.

Phil's in the living room one day, hands busy with a needle and thread as he darns one of the wool socks he'd picked up in a hunting store ages ago. Faintly, he can hear the sounds of Tommy and Tubbo in the backyard, doing... something. He's not sure what, really, but it serves as background noise to his inner thoughts as he fixes the hole in the toe of his sock. He's nearly done when the door creaks and he glances up, expecting to see Techno coming in with a backpack full of new books, maybe. He'd asked him to stop by the town library after all.

That is not what he gets. What he gets is Techno, blood painted across his face in a grim spatter pattern, and a figure hanging off his shoulder. Phil shoots to his feet in an instant, sock forgotten as he immediately ducks under the couch and grabs their medical kit.

“Sit him on the couch,” he instructs, and Techno moves to comply. He’s got a few bags on his back, the man hanging off his shoulder pale and unmoving, feet dragging against the carpet. “Are you hurt?”

“No,” Techno says, and his voice is shaking slightly as he sets the man down on the couch and then slumps his shoulders, letting the bags thump to the ground. One of them twangs.

“Were either of you bitten? Get anything in your eyes, mouth?” Phil knows the questions are rapid fire, but he needs to know as he gives Techno a once-over and then turns to address the obviously wounded man bleeding on their couch. Techno grimaces, and Phil can hear the exhaustion in his voice as he slumps to sit on the floor.

“Not to my knowledge.” Phil starts at the man’s head and then scans downwards. The guy’s young, a flop of brown curls covering his forehead and parts of his face (Phil pushes it back to look for a head wound and finds nothing). He’s got cracked glasses hanging off his nose that Phil ignores for now, the jacket he’s wearing brown and torn and stained with dirt. He’s messy in general, but the main concern is what’s under Phil’s hands and the pressure he’s exerting at the moment. The gash is large, maybe about eight inches long at first glance. The side of his torso is covered in blood, a makeshift bandage wrapped around the injury that’s obviously Techno’s work. There are a couple other, smaller wounds, but none as pressing as the laceration on his stomach.

“Get me towels and water,” he says, ignoring the slight pained noise from the man above him. At least he’s alive, that’s good. “It’s alright, mate. You’re alright,” he reassures him, although there’s no response. Phil is pretty sure he’s unconscious.

Techno returns a moment later from the kitchen, handing Phil the items requested one by one as he carefully undoes what Techno did out in the street. The bloody bandages go to one side to be cleaned later, and Phil presses the clean towel to the wound to sop up remaining blood and puts pressure on it once again. Phil can feel his hands shaking but ignores it in favor of glancing over their medical kit.

“What happened?” He finally asks, hearing the slight thump of Techno’s knees hitting the ground, and the ruffling of items as he searches for more bandages. It’s silent for a moment.

“I went to check on the hoard in the center of town,” he explains, and Phil inhales sharply. Of all the places to go, Techno of course chooses the one most dangerous part of the town. “This guy was in the middle of it. Exploring, I guess. Still conscious at that point. I tried to get him to leave, but he did something or one of them just woke up, and... when I killed it, everything else woke up.” Phil lifts his hands for a moment to inspect the wound underneath, noting that the flow of blood had slowed at least a tiny bit. “He, uh. We fucking bolted. I dropped one of the machetes and one of the stupid fucking monsters got it in its hand. You know how they swing around like crazy. It got him.” Techno inhales, and Phil keeps holding the towel down over the injury, eyes on the pale face above them. “I took care of what I could and then booked it.”

“So they’re all awake and roaming?” Phil asks, a sudden bolt of fear running down his spine as he remembers that there are two *other* people he needs to take care of. “Tommy and Tubbo are outside- go get them, and lock the doors back up.”

Techno's silent as he heads off, and Phil takes the moment to breathe. It's one hell of a story, but right now he has to focus on what he knows. Carefully, he pulls away the towel from the wound again, inspecting it. It's long, but not too deep. The bleeding has slowed enough that Phil can wipe away at it and look before it starts to seep again, and eventually he settles for keeping pressure on the man's side and waiting for the others to come back in. He can hear their voices, Tommy and Tubbo arguing with Techno as they come in, but it quickly settles into shocked silence when they peer into the living room.

"Who the hell is that?" Tommy asks, breaking the silence and looking slightly pale at the amount of blood on Phil's hands. "What is he doing here?"

"Ask Techno. Tech, will you boil some water? I need to wash this out, and sterilize a needle and some kind of thread for stitches. Tommy, you and Tubbo go upstairs, okay? Keep an eye out the windows." Phil is almost surprised by how calm he sounds. He certainly doesn't feel it. He keeps his eyes on Tommy and Tubbo for the moment, ignoring how Techno makes his way yet again into the kitchen and comes back with the necessary materials, poking the fire to stir it. "Tommy."

"What if he's sick?" Tommy asks, fiercely clinging to the blanket that serves as their door. "What if he wakes up and kills the both of you?"

"He won't," Phil promises. "He's fine, just hurt. Please, Tommy."

"Tommy," Tubbo says, and Phil flicks his gaze over to the other. Tubbo looks slightly more pale than even the man on the sofa, eyes moving anxiously between Phil and the man and the blood. "Tommy, I'm going upstairs." And with that, Tubbo darts across the living room and into the hall. Footsteps head up to the second floor, and Tommy only hesitates a moment before following.

"Thank fuck," Phil mutters to himself, swallowing down the lump in his throat as he glances back down to the man's stomach and the wound. Right. Boiling water. Techno's already got a pot on, twisting his hands together anxiously as he sits by it and watches. He's still got blood and gore on his face, and the bags he'd dropped earlier are sitting in the middle of the room. Phil decides to ignore it all for now, and is about to ask Techno to take his place so he can get thread when the man shifts slightly under him. Both their eyes go wide, and a groan of pain can clearly be heard.

"Fuck," the man says, voice pained. "Fuck, fuck, fuck."

"Fuck is right," Phil says, but he's relieved that he's at least talking. "You're alright, mate. Just a big fuckin' gash."

"Tis but a flesh wound," Techno mumbles somewhere behind him. Phil ignores it.

"Hurts," the man says, and his hands flit from side to side, fingers twitching. "Where am I?"

"Somewhere safe," Phil promises, keeping his hands firmly on his stomach. "We're going to fix you right up, I swear. Nothing bad here. It's gonna hurt, but you're gonna be okay."

There's no response from the man after that, but he's clearly awake now, eyebrows scrunching and twisting together in pain. His fingers twitch more often than not, and Phil doesn't bother to try and get him to engage just yet.

"He fell pretty hard," Techno says quietly as takes the boiling water off of the fire to rest for a bit. "When he got hit. On the pavement."

"Concussion if he's unlucky, then," Phil says in response, glancing yet again over to the medkit. "I wish we had a suture kit. I always thought one would be handy, but they're nowhere. Didn't dare go into hospitals. Do you think a regular thread would be okay?"

Techno hums. "Floss might be better," he says after a second. "Water resistant."

"Good idea," Phil says. "Grab that, then. And a needle. This isn't gonna be fun, I'm really sorry." The last sentence is directed at their bloody guest, who just twists his shoulders uncomfortably and winces. He takes the silence as permission, glancing at the wound again. Hopefully it'll only need a few to be stable.

Sewing things is hard. Sewing human skin is worse, Phil finds out. He's never had to do this before, never had a wound this bad. Techno has, but when Phil tries to get him to do it they both realize his hands are shaking so badly that it would likely make it worse. So Phil follows Techno's instructions, sterilizing the needle and floss (taken from Phil's sewing kit and the bathroom respectively) and cleaning the wound thoroughly before starting the small stitches. It takes time and concentration, but after an hour or so they're finished. The man is silent the whole time- at first, his fists clench, but by the end Phil's assumed the pain had taken enough of a toll for him to pass out again. They wrap the job in bandages and dunk the others in the water pot, both of them washing their hands and the fabric until the water's stained deep reddish-brown.

"You should clean yourself up," Phil says, handing the pot to Techno to get rid of and giving their patient another glance. He looks a bit more peaceful now, with the blood mostly cleaned up and the bandages crisp and white on his stomach. "Go. I'll be okay here for a bit."

Techno goes with a nod, the back door shutting with a plasticy crash behind him. It's just Phil and their mystery man, asleep on the couch. Phil sits on the floor, staring at his unconscious form, and finally lets himself sink into the fear and anxiety while he's somewhat alone. He doesn't do this often, but he needs it.

It doesn't last long. There's movement upstairs and then footsteps down the hall, so he wipes his face the best he can and sucks in a couple even breaths to steady himself. By the time Tubbo and Tommy are in the living room, he's something approaching normal. They don't notice Phil's shaken and exhausted demeanor for the most part anyways, too busy staring at their guest.

"Is he okay?" Tubbo asks after they've finally crepted into the living room and are resting against Phil, Tubbo against his side and Tommy against him.

"I think he'll be fine," Phil says, letting the heat from Tubbo melt into his bones and relax him a bit. This is normal- this is good. "Just a lot of blood loss and excitement. Hopefully

he'll sleep for a while and heal up."

"And you're *sure* he's not sick?" Tommy's still suspicious, staring at him from across the room and distrustful. Phil can't find it in him to blame him.

"Pretty sure." He yawns, lifting a hand to cover his mouth slightly and then shuts his eyes, thumping his head back against the wall. "If he is, then we can deal with it."

"You can sleep if you want," Tubbo offers after a second. When Phil opens his eyes, he now finds them both staring at him.

"I'm fine," he says, and Tommy rolls his eyes, shoving himself off of Tubbo and instead moving around to come and sit on Phil's other side.

"Bullshit," he calls out, tucking himself neatly against Phil's shoulder. "You just stitched a man up. That's fucking exhausting. Plus, you had to deal with us in the middle of all that, and we're probably worse than the dead guy. Go to sleep, old man. Tubbo and I can keep an eye on the idiot who ruined our couch."

There's silence for a moment. Then Phil snorts. "He did ruin our couch, didn't he?" He asks, because he's certain under their visitor is a bloodstain at least the size of his hand. They'd have to flip the cushion or find a new one. It's amusing in a weird way, and after a minute all three of them are laughing.

"What's goin' on?" Techno's monotone floats through the air as he enters the room, glancing in confusion between Phil and the boys and the guy on the couch. Phil only cackles harder at the sight and timing, which leads to Tommy and Tubbo laughing harder, which cracks Phil up even more. It's a wonderfully malicious cycle of laughter, and the confusion on Techno's face makes it worse. "What's- I don't understand, did I miss the joke? Guys? Earth to Phil? Tommy? Tubbo???"

Phil laughs, and feels like some of the weight has been lifted off his shoulders.

Wilbur wakes up the next morning.

They'd all taken shifts that night staying up to watch him. Phil didn't think he was sick, and was positive of this after they'd passed the midnight mark and he still hadn't shown any symptoms. The disease usually spread quickly, with symptoms showing anywhere from thirty minutes after exposure to four hours. But four hours has certainly passed, and there's no blackish tint to his skin, no smell of decay and death, and no sudden spasms and milky-white eyes. Phil does check his pupils at one point, and they seem to be alright, so he thinks brain damage is also a no. But their patient sleeps through the night, seemingly exhausted. Phil notes that he's skinny and tall, and when taking the time to clean up the bags on the floor

finds absolutely zero food in the pack that he doesn't recognize. There are notebooks, however, and a water bottle, and wrappers from food past eaten. The other bag that came with their visitor turns out to be a guitar case, and inside is a beat-up but functional acoustic guitar. Phil does not let Tommy play with it, instead putting it back in the case and setting it down in the corner with the man's pack. He takes first shift, so he's asleep when the sun rises.

He wakes to an empty room.

An *almost* empty room.

There's shuffling in the corner, and when Phil turns his head, there is their guest, attempting to sling the guitar case over his shoulder. He's clearly in pain- the scrunch is still between his eyebrows, and there's a soft curse when the strap hits something wrong. Phil sits up, and he knows the other sees him when he goes entirely still. They stare at each other.

"You should probably lie back down," Phil says after a second of their standoff, gesturing to the couch again. "You bled quite a lot yesterday. And most likely have a minor concussion on top of that."

"Fuck," the man says, but the guitar comes off his shoulder despite it.

The man's name is Wilbur, Phil learns, both of them sitting in spots across the room from each other. He's twenty-four, he'd been traveling for ages, and he hadn't expected to wake up in their house, only recalling slightly the events of the past day or so. Phil resists scolding Techno and Tommy and Tubbo when they return only a few minutes later- they'd gone out to refill the water containers from the stream, assuming they'd be back before either Phil or Wilbur woke up.

Phil puts Wilbur on bedrest. It's mostly against his will, but every time he attempts to move off the couch and protest it's followed by a wince of pain and a reluctant trip back to his position. Techno also helps, his most menacing glare being used simply to intimidate their guest back into a lying-down position. Wilbur also nearly refuses to let Phil change the bandages, at least until Phil promises that it's only one time, just so he can show him how to do it properly.

"I'm not fucking stupid," Wilbur says in protest during the process, gnawing on his lip so hard it bleeds to fight off the pain. Phil sees a flash of Tommy for a moment in the stubbornness, but it passes just as quick as it came. "I know how to bandage myself up."

"I know, but you're going to be doing it a lot," Phil reminds him, hands steady as he wraps him up again after cleaning the wound with more boiled water and applying the barest minimum of their antibiotic cream. Wilbur stares down at the bandages around his stomach and gently touches them, wincing slightly in pain.

"Why are you wasting your supplies on me?" He asks after a moment, and Phil notices how his eyes flick to the tube of antibiotics. It's precious, and kept safely in the center of their kit. He focuses on that for a minute so he doesn't have to answer, packing it all up and then snapping the plastic shut with a click that echoes around the living room.

"Makes it so there's one less monster in the world," Phil replies after a stint of silence. He's not sure if he's talking about Wilbur or the zombies or himself.

They let him stay on the couch since it's sort of his bed now- what with the blood and dirt he's accumulated on it. Phil dishes out five servings of dinner now instead of four, pointedly saying nothing about how Wilbur scarfs it down without question. Food apparently, is something he won't argue against receiving. The living room had been their community spot for the most part, especially during the winter when they couldn't leave it unless they were wearing five or six layers. Wilbur's presence seems to shatter that notion for a little bit- Tommy and Tubbo are curious but resistant to the change, and Techno seems to find it difficult to even look at Wilbur for more than ten minutes. He doesn't leave the room, mostly on Phil's insistence, and the fact that he can hardly walk makes it so he can't really argue that fact.

"I don't see why we have to take care of him," Tommy says one afternoon, when Phil's taken to the outdoors and the sun in their backyard for a bit. To both give Wilbur some privacy and to have some alone time of his own- that is, until Tommy and Tubbo joined him.

"It's the right thing to do," Phil says, turning a page over in his book and settling in more comfortably on the grass. Tubbo's ripping it up to his left and depositing it in Tommy's hair methodically, although the blond doesn't seem to care for the time being. He's too busy pushing Phil's buttons.

"Right, but it was also his fault that Techno was in danger, and that the zombies are out and about again." That is true. Techno had been keeping their street clear, but according to him they'd spread out from the hoard in town and become somewhat active again, shambling the streets. Phil had seen one, an early morning just after Wilbur had arrived, shuffling it's way down the road almost blindly. In place of eyes and mouth was a greenish-brown structure, and Phil assumed it navigated by sound based on the way it snapped it's head toward him as he shuffled to get back inside quickly and grab his axe.

It was the first deadwalker he'd killed in a while. He hadn't missed the feeling one bit.

"It's the right thing to do," Phil repeats, ignoring Tommy's groan and the way he flops back into the dirt. Tubbo switches to sprinkling grass onto his chest. "He's not bad. He's quite nice, actually."

"He's annoying," Tommy complains, spitting out a blade of grass that makes it in his mouth when Tubbo lands it on his face. "He's all whiny and shit. And paranoid."

"So are you," Tubbo cuts in, and Tommy reaches out blindly to try and hit him with an open palm.

"Shut up!"

"It's true," Phil teases, closing his book since it appears his effort to be alone and get some reading done is going to be futile with them here. He swears they have separation anxiety,

since they never seem to leave him alone. (And if he's being honest, Phil must have it too. The moments without Tommy and Tubbo seem to be the worst ones.) "You are whiny, and paranoid. And annoying as well. Maybe you should talk to Wilbur more, you two might be quite a pair if you ever get along." Tommy indignant gasps make him smile, and Tubbo just laughs. Out of the corner of his eye, Phil sees the brown shape in the kitchen window shift to the side, then disappear.

Techno brings Wilbur new clothes that night, a gesture that seems to surprise him. A new jacket, shorter than his old one but the same dingy brown. A shirt is pulled from the box of extras in their closet, clean white, and Phil promises to fix up a pair of pants for him as well. Wilbur's tall, so any pair of his or Techno's they try on leave his ankles fairly exposed. Tommy's shooting up as well- he's gained a few inches over the winter and Phil is sure more are in store.

"Thanks," Wilbur says later, the new jacket slung comfortably over his shoulders. He looks tired- moving is a chore when you've got a gash and stitches in your stomach that keeps you from bending over or twisting easily. They're all in the living room, an uncomfortable silence stretching between them as Techno methodically collects their dishes so that he can put them to the side, after they'd eaten. Phil's stomach is full and his eyes are getting somewhat heavy with sleep, so he takes the quiet as a moment to settle down.

Across the room, Techno pauses from where he had been stacking the bowls. "...you're welcome," he says after a moment, then disappears through the kitchen blanket.

"He's not so talkative, huh?" Wilbur asks after a moment, and Phil decides to see where this goes and just shuts his eyes.

"Neither are you." Surprisingly (or is it?) Tubbo's the one to reply. "You do have a big cut, though. If I was hurt, I don't think I'd talk a lot."

"You talk a lot no matter what," Tommy kicks in, and Tubbo just rolls his eyes and scoffs.

"Says you," he grumbles, and then there's a laugh.

Tommy's laugh is loud and abrasive, the type of laugh that's horrible and contagious all at once. When Phil hears it, he knows something's going on that he'll probably have to step in and deal with. Tubbo's is much of the same, although of the softer variety but no less indicative of mischief. Techno doesn't laugh often, but when he does it's scratchy and throaty and from his chest. Phil's always happy when something gets him to laugh, even if it's at a poorly-timed joke or at the expense of others. Their laughs are the ones he's familiar with now, after traveling and living with them for months, even a year now for Tommy and Tubbo. Wilbur's laugh is nothing like any of the others. It's low and breathy and rises in pitch at the end, and the smile that breaks out over his face is all-encompassing; the rest of his features are drawn in simply by one action.

"You're ridiculous," Wilbur says, leaning back against the arm of the couch and still smiling after his momentary chuckle. "What are you, twelve? Thirteen?" Based on how his voice

lilts, Phil thinks he's teasing. It's an odd display of emotion from their previously-stoic patient, but he's welcome to the change.

"I- you, well, fuckin' excuse me! I'll have you know we're both older than that thank you very much, sixteen is a respectable fuckin' age. Or seventeen. Not sure."

"Children? How did two children survive an apocalypse then, huh?"

"Wouldn't you like to know," Tommy huffs. Phil jumps in before anyone can press on that tender subject any farther.

"I'd like to think I had a hand in that," he points out, watching all three of their gazes snap to him. Tommy's face scrunches up for a second, then he seems to concede the point through tight lips.

"Maybe a little," he admits, and Tubbo flops back onto the carpet.

"Phil's definitely saved *my* life. Probably more than once! Tommy has too."

"And me." Techno peeks back into the room, and Phil scooches to the side of his chair to let him have a seat on the arm without feeling too crowded. Techno perches there delicately, crossing his arms against his chest. "I saved your sorry butts the day we met."

"How did you meet?" Wilbur's looking between them, from the boys on the floor to Phil and Techno in the chair. Absently, Phil wonders what his prescription is and how difficult it would be to try and find new glasses. His pair is horribly cracked.

"Techno stole our food, and we tracked him down to get it back then got stuck in a ghost town. Had to kill a bunch of fucks to get out, cause they were trying to get into the big hoard at the center and we needed to also go that way. Then he decided he wanted to stick around and we let him." Tommy explains, and while that's not the whole story, it's good enough for now. Phil just nods.

"Not like you could stop me," Techno says lazily, leaning back against the chair and eyeing the two teenagers below him. "I've bested you both in combat multiple times, nerds."

"Aw, that's mean," Tubbo complains, tipping his head back to stare at Phil and frown. "Tell him that's mean, Phil."

"Techno's right," Phil says instead, laughing a little as Tommy sputters in rage. "He could beat us easily. I guess we didn't have a choice when he came along."

"He still gave us our food back!!" Tommy points out, and Techno rolls his eyes.

"Because I was bein' *nice*. I don't do that often."

"He does seem quite mean," Wilbur says from his position on the couch, and when Phil glances over at him, he's smiling. "I like it. Also, I think your story of meeting me is way better than that. Mine's more dramatic, which makes it better, obviously."

“Dramatic?” Techno snorts. “I’d like to think we’re focusing less on the dramatics and more on survival nowadays.”

“Definitely not.” Wilbur takes a moment to swipe his hair out of his face and Phil settles backwards, content to just watch this interaction for the moment. “Why do you think I lugged that thing around for the last gazillion years? It wasn’t easy.” He motions toward the guitar, and Tommy makes himself known again.

“What, because it’s ‘dramatic’?” He finger quotes the word, glaring. “I bet you can’t even play anyways, and just carry it around to look cool. Get many girls that way, twat?”

“There aren’t many girls left, but yes I can fucking play.” Wilbur glares and reaches out, tugging the guitar case into his lap and carefully extracting the instrument. The way he holds it is careful, like he’s scared it will break any moment, but once it’s in his lap his fingers get more confident and strum a few times over the strings. “I write songs, too. When I’m bored.”

“Play us one?” Phil asks, and Wilbur looks up at him from the strings. “If you’re comfortable, that is,” he amends, and Wilbur shrugs.

“Well. Uh, sure,” he says, and strums a couple times again. Tommy scoffs, leaning back, and then Wilbur starts to play. It’s not an aggressive song by any means, but he’s using his whole arm and leaning back a bit as he plays. He glances up a couple times, gnawing on his lip and Phil distinctly notes it as a nervous tick. After a second he stops, letting his arm go still. “I’ve never played in front of alive people before, you know.”

“Pussy,” Tommy calls out from his spot on the floor, and Wilbur’s spine straightens and he’s back to playing in an instant. Techno laughs beside Phil quietly, but in truth, the music is good. It’s a lilting tune, and after a second of glaring at Tommy Wilbur’s turning his attention back to his fingers. His shoulders hunch as he watches them, head tipping his way and that until finally the lyrics tumble out. He bops his head slightly with the beat he’s created.

The song’s about sickness, about death, about pain and loss, but the words are hiding it beneath a thin veneer of joy. Phil props his chin in his hand and elbow on his knee, watching as Wilbur plays and sings, occasionally glancing up at them for reactions. The song only lasts a minute but Phil’s enthralled, leaning back into the chair as Wilbur trails off mid-sentence.

“I haven’t finished it,” he admits, but Phil’s clapping loudly anyways.

“You’re pretty good at the music stuff!” He says, watching as Wilbur’s face sort of lights up.

“You think?” He asks.

“Nah, you’re shit.” Phil swings his leg out and feels it connect to soft flesh (lightly, it’s not like he’d actually try and punt Tommy. Probably.). Tommy yelps, then shoves at Phil’s foot and pulls at his sock. “Fine! Fine, you’re actually alright. It wasn’t bad.”

“Sing something else!” Tubbo grins from his spot on the floor next to Tommy, who is throwing Phil’s sock as far across the room as he can. “I liked it. It was sad.”

“Everything’s sad nowadays,” Wilbur points out, and Techno snorts.

“Wow. Emo.” A pause. “It was alright, yeah. Not my type of music, but still good. I liked it.” Despite the hesitance to the compliment, Wilbur’s face glows a little brighter.

It becomes sort of a nightly tradition. It’s not a concert all the time, but the sounds of guitar can be heard more often than not now around the house. At night, after they’ve all eaten and settled, Wilbur takes it out again and plays or works on his songs, showing them off to Phil or taking pointers from Tubbo and criticism from Tommy. The quiet sounds of music become familiar, and it’s nice. Wilbur settles in, his wound healing well enough that Phil one day tugs off the bandages and determines it time to snip the makeshift stitches out. It’s a slow and painful process, Wilbur hissing curses between his teeth as he thumps his hand against the couch and Techno pats his head aimlessly, watching Phil cut and pull. But they come out without a hitch for the most part, and from there the healing is easy. By the end of the week, Wilbur’s up and about fully again, wandering outside and messing with Tommy and Tubbo in the garden behind the house. He and Techno go on walks together, and Phil sits with him in the living room in the mornings and talk about things that they miss.

“I miss coffee,” Phil says, staring at the fireplace and cursing the absence of the drink. “I haven’t had a cup in forever.”

“I miss wine,” Wilbur says, and they share a glance.

“God, I fucking miss wine,” Phil agrees, and they both bust out laughing. Tommy and Tubbo aren’t up yet, the upstairs quiet as the room they’d taken still had its door shut when Phil passed it in the morning.

“Maybe there’s a bottle somewhere,” Wilbur says once the giggles stop, leaning back against the couch and tugging his blanket up over his chest. “In a house that Techno hasn’t raided.

“Impossible,” Phil tells him. “Techno’s raided them all at this point. If there was wine, he’d have found it by now.”

“Maybe he has found it and he’s just hiding it,” Wilbur says, making them both break out into laughter again. “Drunk Techno. That’d be a sight.”

“I can’t even imagine,” Phil laughs, covering his face with a hand and trying not to be too loud. “I miss showers. Hot showers.”

“I miss chocolate.”

“Pasta.”

“There were these little dinners I’d get from the gas station across from my apartment-- they were microwaved and awful but they were cheap and they really weren’t that bad if you put unholy amounts of sauce on them. I miss those.”

“Hmm. No microwaves, unfortunately. I wish we had some better way to cook than over an open flame. I miss warm bread. Toast.” Phil eyes their makeshift kitchen. He’d been planning

on trying to redo it, making it easier to cook with, but just hadn't gotten around to it yet. Maybe it's an idea for today.

"I miss consistency." Wilbur's voice startles him out of his thoughts about projects, and Phil glances over.

"Huh?" He hadn't really caught it the first time, didn't register what he meant. Wilbur's also staring at the fire pit, eyes locked onto the coals like he might be able to sink into the heat.

"Consistency," he says, then clarifies. "I miss being able to have a place. My apartment. My mum's house." Phil stares at him for a long moment, then looks around again. The guitar case is propped in the corner, Wilbur's boots lined up with Tommy and Tubbo's by the door in the kitchen. Five bowls stacked from last night, a tribute to their dinner.

"Stay here," Phil says, and Wilbur is suddenly looking at him. "With us."

"I don't want to impose, now that I'm feeling better--" Wilbur starts, but Phil waves a hand to cut him off.

"Don't be stupid," he chides. "You've already been here what? Three weeks? Two and a half? Tommy and Tubbo like you--"

"Like annoying me, is what it is--"

--and Techno certainly enjoys having you around. I like having you around. Stay." The last word doesn't feel like a command. It feels like an invitation, and Phil watches as Wilbur fights with himself in his brain. The idea of being a burden isn't something Phil is familiar with, but he's watched Tommy struggle with it, watched Tubbo, watched Techno. Hell, even that previous statement was a lie-- Phil knows what it's like to feel unneeded and unwanted. Phil knows he'll agree to whatever Wilbur decides, but the relief that floods through him when he eventually nods is undeniable.

"Alright, yeah, sure," he says, and that's that. Neither of them directly say anything about it to Tommy or Tubbo when they come down that morning, nor Techno when he returns from his morning walk, but nothing really needs to be said. Wilbur unpacks his backpack and claims the living room couch as his bed for real, and nobody questions him. He slips into their established unit like he'd always been there, infecting them all with a little more love.

A few days later, Phil walks in from his morning venture to a messy fucking living room. He certainly hadn't left it this way, and the perpetrators are sitting right in the middle of it all.

"What the hell?" He asks, stepping gingerly over a pile of red fabric. Tommy and Tubbo are both holding scissors, snipping carefully away at something yellow, and Wilbur's got his

head bowed low over an expanse of black cotton sheet with a needle and thread. “What is this?”

“We’re creating a nation,” Tubbo says, as if that explains anything. Phil catches a hint of Wilbur smiling.

“You’re what?” He asks, and Tommy snips carefully away to reveal some sort of cross shape, tossing it into a pile of others that they’d obviously made earlier while he was out. He was going to have to go through his fabric boxes again, make sure they didn’t take anything relatively important. From the looks of it though, they didn’t. Just scrap.

“Well, the government doesn’t exist anymore,” Tommy says, turning around to snag up more mustardy fabric. “So we’re making our own. This is gonna be the flag. It’s gonna be fucking huge, we’re gonna make a ton so we can ask Techno to put them up all over town with us. It’s called L’Manberg, ‘cause we’re all big men here-”

“No girls allowed!” Tubbo cheers.

“-and don’t take L’s. Wil’s president, I’m vice, and Tubbo’s secretary of state. Do you want to be treasurer, Phil? We still need a treasurer, and you’re weirdly obsessed with the whole inventory thing.” Phil supposes he walked right into that one, considering the notebook he has full of items and how he knows where everything is put in context of the house. He looks around again at their messy flag, red and black and gold and white.

“Why don’t you ask Techno to be treasurer?” He says faintly, trying to maybe point the conversation in a direction away from himself.

“No can do.” Techno’s voice comes from behind him, and makes him jump in surprise. The other man is there, pink hair knotted into a bun at the base of his neck and still in his pajamas. He’d never left this morning, apparently, and based on the way he plops down next to Wilbur and hands over another spindle of thread, he’s regretting that decision. “I’m the department of defense.” Wilbur cackles slightly under his breath, taking the thread and putting it to the side. Phil looks around at the mess, then at the four of them, all grinning and looking at him expectantly. Phil puts his hands up in mock surrender, taking careful steps backwards and out of the room.

“Nope. Find another treasurer. I’m not involved in this,” he says, ignoring Tommy’s booing and turning to head back outside for another walk. That’s a headache he *doesn’t* need today.

The L’Manberg flags decorate the town for weeks after-- Phil counts four or five of them just on their street, the biggest of them all attached to the house. He’s sure there’s more in town, evidence of them scattered across the streets and houses like a shout, declaring their presence. Claiming their land. Phil takes none of them down.

Summer comes with a wave of heat, and Phil's working in their garden.

Techno had found seed packets at some point, and Phil had stored them away over the winter until the frost had melted and the ground loosened again. From there, it was easy to simply look up the best growing seasons for each plant and find a spot good enough to plant them. They choose a part of the house's backyard, growing plants in one corner until they start to spill out under the careful thumb of Tubbo's. So they make the entire yard a garden, plants happily blooming under the sun. Phil's so happy for the sun, oftentimes turning his face to catch some of the rays. He knows the others do it too, and he catches Tommy and Tubbo more than once in the garden, on their backs and arms splayed to the side as they talk for hours on end.

Sunscreen becomes important in his mind, especially after a particularly long day of gardening and Phil's neck and arms are bright pink.

He's out there one day, lotion having been slathered on after a run from Techno into a neighboring town, pulling weeds with both Tubbo and Tommy. The two boys are doing more play than work, chasing each other around and shrieking in glee whenever either of them manages to catch the other. The garden's in fine shape, so Phil doesn't bother to lecture them about helping. In time, even he stops the weeding in favor of just sitting there and resting.

It's not often he gets to rest like this, shoulders completely relaxed and mind fairly empty. Phil doesn't find himself worrying too often nowadays, what with most of the dead either being killed a second time, or converging in the centers of towns and sprouting. He worries when Techno leaves, yes, but Techno's currently inside and doing... something with Wilbur. He thinks they might be trying to make vodka out of potatoes. He's not going to ask (at least not until they succeed). So they're all here and safe, and it's perfectly fine and well. It's dandy, Phil could even say.

“Hello.”

“Hello,” Phil responds before his brain can entirely process what he just heard. Then it does, and he's on his feet in a flash, hands scrambling for the only weapon he'd thought to even bring outside, the sharp side of the trowel flashing dangerously in his fingers. It was small, but it would do in a pinch and could leave a mark or even kill if he aimed for the soft spots of the temple, the eyes-

“Whoa, chill out.” The voice is coming from behind the fence and when Phil looks, he spots someone peering over, one arm hanging like he'd been trying to climb and decided it was a bad idea. He's got a shock of dirty blonde hair peeking out from the hood of a green hoodie, and a mask covering the lower half of his face. Phil can't see his mouth, but can hear him just fine from how close he is. “Just heard screaming and decided to investigate.”

Tommy and Tubbo, definitely. It was hard to distinguish their play screams from real ones sometimes.

“We're fine,” Phil says, distinctly aware of how they look right now, with a house and a garden and minimal weapons. They look like someone easy to steal from, if you were an

outsider. Whoever this was would get a rude awakening if they tried. "Just kids. You should go."

"You have kids?" The guy seems surprised, glancing around the garden curiously. "In this world?"

"You should go," Phil repeats, watching as the guy glances towards him again and notes the trowel still clasped in his fingers. Tension lingers, heavy and thick between them, then the guy disappears from the top of the fence and there's a thump as his feet hit the ground again on the other side.

"Bye!" Phil hears, and then footsteps, fading. Then they're gone.

Shaking, he sinks down to the dirt and lets the trowel drop from his grasp. The adrenaline is still pumping through his body, heart racing as it pushes it through his system over and over again. That had been another person, someone living and breathing and alive, and a potential threat to the safe little bubble they'd created here. Phil hadn't allowed himself to think about something being able to pop that bubble, but now it was all he could think of. The man with the dirty blond hair and mask, voice bright despite how dull the sky suddenly seemed to be. Other people were still alive out there-- of course they were. Phil knew that. He knew about compounds people had created, and as the years went by there were less and less zombies and more and more people linking up, like they had. It wasn't impossible that someone else would stumble upon their little home, see the flags that were still up around the town. The only problem was knowing if they were malicious or not. His fingers are shaking, and Phil takes a moment to dig them into the soft dirt and breathe.

"Phil?" Tubbo's voice startles him enough that he grabs for the trowel again, whipping his head around to face them.

Tommy and Tubbo are standing there, Wilbur and Techno slightly ahead of them both. They're all holding weapons.

"It's alright," he says, trying to reassure them. He's on his feet again, having scrambled to them in the same moment he'd grabbed the trowel. Phil's not supposed to be *scared*, especially not of something as silly as another breathing person, so he takes a moment to breathe in and out and relax his shoulders, not seem as tense.

"They heard voices," Techno explains, and his feet hit the ground with solid thumps as he makes his way over to the fence and hoists himself up, peering over it. "Who was it?"

"No idea," Phil says, twisting the trowel around in his hands before he realizes he's doing so, then stops. Wilbur's eyes flash to the movement, then back up to his face. "Never seen him before. He just left when I told him to."

"There are footprints," Techno says, and Phil reaches back to pat the hand that's clinging onto the back of his shirt. Probably Tubbo's. "I could follow." They all turn to him, expectant. Waiting for an order or an idea, Phil realizes. Waiting for permission. He thinks about it for a second, clearing his mind with the reassuring wind of their presence, and then carefully shakes it.

"No," he says, reaching up to scrub at his forehead and maybe get some of the sweat off.
"No, leave it. Hopefully he was just passing through. Don't beat a dead horse."

"...that's disgusting," Tommy says, face all pinched up.

"You're disgusting," Wilbur snaps back almost instinctively, and just like that, the tension's broken. From there they dissolve into argumentative fighting over who's more disgusting, although most of the talking is done between Wilbur and Tommy. Phil stands there for a minute, still gripping the trowel between his fingers. He's not shaking anymore, thankfully, but he does jump slightly when a hand lands on his shoulder. He turns, catching Techno's eye for a second before lowering his gaze.

"Most people these days have been brutal in order to survive," he says, voice low enough that it floats under the cacophony the others are making. "We have."

"Yeah," Phil says, and his throat is dry. Techno's grip on his shoulder tightens the slightest amount.

"But," he continues, "there's a difference between surviving and thriving. 'The greatest victory is that which requires no battle.'"

Phil turns slightly, catching his eye again from where they'd both dropped their gazes. "Is that from *The Art of War*?" He asks. Techno's small smile turns into a grin, and then he pats Phil hard enough on the shoulder to nearly topple him before heading back inside.

All of them are on edge that night. It's clear by the way Techno keeps a weapon in arms reach, by how Tommy and Tubbo stay in that night and don't go on the porch, and how Wilbur quiets down earlier than usual on his shitty couch bed. They all part ways for bed earlier than normal, but Phil finds it hard to sleep. He keeps hearing imaginary sounds-- the creak of a floorboard, the rustle of a window, the click of a lock. Paranoia sets in and Techno's words ring through his mind, and Phil finds himself stuffing his feet into his shoes and tying the laces. He snags his axe and attaches it to his belt, and then with quiet care he makes his way out of the house. It's still early in the night, the moon casting a fair amount of light onto the street and letting him see fairly well. He's not worried about the dead at this point-- it's the living he's looking for. Phil takes a moment to compose himself, and then settles his shoulders. He survived four years on his own. There's a reason his hand fits so easily onto the handle of his axe, and a reason why his eyes catch on anything out of the ordinary in the shadows. Phil might've been the first to settle down in their new home-- but he's just as paranoid as Techno most days.

His eyes catch on every little thing as he makes his way over the fence in the backyard. Like Techno said, there are footprints in the dirt of the next yard over, and although they fade out quickly, it gives him an inkling of which direction they went. While there's not a solid trail anywhere, Phil starts to see things out of place. A flag that's shifted, bushes that were crushed. When you walk a neighborhood a million times, you start to notice the small details. Phil follows the tiny trail they've left until finally, he's nearing the center of town. From here he can hear the soft shifting noises of the dead where they stand, heads tipped to the sky and

faces brown and peeling. He has to gather his courage slightly, tugging up his mask and deciding to inspect. Creeping in between houses, Phil presses one hand to the wall and peers around the corner. The square seems empty except for him and the zombies, so he steps forward and avoids the very center like it's the plague. Because it is. He circles the square once, peering towards houses and in between them down the streets, but sees nothing. His second sweep comes up empty as well, so Phil stands there for a long, long moment. Silent.

Something shuffles in one of the streets to his left.

Quietly, he heads that way. It's not hard to hear it now-- the sound of footsteps and quiet mumbling. Tired mumbling. That's good. A tired person is easier to fight off than an awake one, and Phil is pretty fucking awake right now. He grips his axe tight in hand, fingers curling around the grip and settling into their well-worn spots.

A voice echoes through the square and Phil levels his axe.

"Shit," someone says, and then it dawns on him that there are two other shapes besides the one he'd been expecting. This is bad, he realizes, and lowers the axe slightly.

A young man is standing at the front of the group, crossbow in hand. It's not the blond from earlier. Instead, his hair is dark and short, eyes wide in the dark and a pair of white-rimmed glasses perched on his head. He's got a blue hoodie on, and his mask is a similar shade. His eyes are wide, and he's staring at Phil with no small amount of fear. Around him, he can see the blond from before, and then beside him another young man with brown hair and a weird sort of white headband pushing it back and off his face. They're all wearing masks, and Phil is grateful for his as well. They've also all got weapons.

"What are you doing here?" He asks, pushing past the awkwardness and fear that had suddenly risen in his throat. "Why are you sticking around?"

"What?" The dark-haired one speaks first, but before anything else can be said the blond pushes forward and settles himself in front.

"You're the guy from earlier," he says, eyes narrowing slightly. "With the screaming kids."

"Yeah," Phil says, tipping his head to the side. "And I wanted to make sure you hadn't stuck around for the sake of those kids." He watches carefully as the three exchange looks, a mix of surprise and hesitance if he had to guess.

"I mean, it's three versus one," the guy with the headband says, while the glasses one scoffs.

"Sapnap!" He hisses, turning to look at him. The blond keeps his gaze on Phil. "We're not going to just randomly attack people," he chides, and the headband kid-- Sapnap, Phil guesses-- shrugs lightly.

"He was kind of being threatening," he points out, and Phil internally agrees. He was. Outwardly he says nothing, staring them down and waiting.

"You have kids." The blond pipes up again. "I still can't get over that fact."

"They're more like teenagers," Phil says, because it's clear this is a point that is being stuck with here. "And a few others as well. We live here. I'm not about to let that be jeopardized."

"I mean, it already is."

"Excuse me?"

"Jeopardized. This thing's still here, after all," says the guy, gesturing mildly towards the pile of dead not too far from their location.

Phil shifts from foot to foot. "Well-- yeah. They're everywhere. I don't know if you've noticed, mate, but we're sort of in the middle stages of an apocalyptic world event."

"Hah, yeah, we noticed. But we can get rid of this. That's why we stuck around," says the bandana guy.

"...what?"

"We're getting rid of these. We've got a way to do it, so when we found one here we knew we had to stop. We didn't know you were living here. That was just Dream being a curious idiot." The dark-haired one says while elbowing the blond, and Phil waves a hand in the air.

"You can. Wait. Hold on. Backpedal. Introduce yourselves, please. Dream?" Phil asks, tipping his head in assumption towards the blond.

"Oh-- uh, right." The blond one with the mask (Dream) turns, gesturing. "This is George. Sapnap."

The two others wave slightly in turn, both with dark hair. The slim one is George, and the other is Sapnap, a white bandana around his head. They've both got masks tucked under their chins, and impenetrable looks. Phil feels a bit outmatched, but he doesn't let it show. "Nice to meet you," he says. "Now. What was that about getting rid of it?"

"We've been going around," says George, turning to face the pile of dead, and the roots of moss that seem to sprout from the center. He points and Phil follows his finger, looking closely. "Touching any of that without protection will get you sick. But we've been careful."

Phil inspects the ground, careful not to let any of his bare skin touch any of the green. He doesn't want to get sick. The deadwalkers in the center make him jumpy, but he ignores it for now. If what the others said was true, then they couldn't move even if they wanted to. They'd have to wake up first, and apparently that takes some damage.

"So how do we get *rid* of it?" He insists, turning back to face the trio.

Sapnap grins, holding up one hand with a lighter and snapping it open. The flame is tiny, small enough that it hardly casts any light, but the shadows on his face say things without words.

"Fire gets it," George says, scuffing his foot in the dirt. "It was an accident, how we discovered it--"

"I didn't know the *gas line* ran under that house--" The lighter snaps shut.

--but it's been super effective so far. We hop from town to town and burn what we can, telling other people. As long as you get the very center of the group down to ashes, and most of the tendrils, it stays away." George keeps pointing as he explains, finger tracing down from the center of the mossy patch and down one of the vines, to his own feet.

"But the spores," Phil begins to ask, and Dream shrugs.

"We figure they've spread already. Now that we know fire can stop it, it'll be easy to burn a patch if it crops up. Besides, don't you think we all would have gotten sick if it was airborne?" Dream's eyes scrunch, and Phil can sort of tell he's grinning under the mask.

"Fair point." He turns his head back to the mass of bodies in the center of town. "What about them? Do they burn?"

George inhales, air hissing through his teeth. "That's kind of the problem," he admits.

"To start the fire and get it going right, we figured out you have to get in the middle and dig down," Sapnap explains, flicking the lighter on and off in his hands. "That's where like, the biggest bundle of everything is."

"Problem with that," Dream finishes, "is that when you start to dig down in the center, whatever hivemind this thing has takes it as a threat and wakes them up."

Slowly, the realization dawns on Phil. "So you have to get rid of the bodies first or you'll be overwhelmed," he says, and watches as the three of them nod. That's difficult. He turns to look at the bodies again, the unnatural poses and the spouts in their eyes and mouths and how they don't even look human anymore. They're just vessels, he realizes, to a parasite that is incredibly dangerous to fight back against. They had been scary back when they were mobile and somewhat lucid, with brains that were still able to run and threaten and jump. Even as their bodies decayed and bones became brittle, they could still make you bleed and spit in your unprotected eyes to pass on the parasite. Phil wonders if maybe that's why they haven't really gotten sick-- maybe the spores weren't spread through air, but direct contact. Fluids.

"We found that out the hard way," Dream says, pulling him out of his thoughts and back into the cool night air. He looks over, and is surprised by the mask suddenly being off his face.

"Jesus," Phil says out loud, then immediately can tell he goes red based on the way both George and Sapnap crack up.

"Rude," Dream says, pulling the mask back over his face. His cheek had been split wide open from just under his ear to the middle of his lips, under his nose. Gums, teeth, and tongue had just been out in the open to see. It had been startling to see, for sure, and Phil is very aware of how rude he'd just been but--

"Jesus *fuck*," he amends, sending both George and Sapnap cackling again. "How did you survive that?"

“A lot of luck,” Dream says, glancing over at the hoard of dead and then back at Phil. “It got infected once or twice, but somehow it got better.”

“It was really gross when it was fresh,” Sapnap says, moving to go sit on one of the porches they’re by, hoisting himself up and kicking his feet. “I thought he was going to die.”

“I thought you were going to die,” Dream shoots back, eyes scrunched. “The way you went pale every time you looked at me--”

“Shut up!”

“Alright, alright.” Phil rolls his eyes, ignoring how much this reminds him of the house down the road. “So, we wake up the dead on the mound and kill them, right? That’s the end goal here?”

“Then burn it to the ground, and all the bodies with it,” Sapnap says, confirming Phil’s theory.

“But that’s what. A hundred and fifty dead?” He gestures to the shape in the distance. “How on earth do we take them all down if they all wake up at once??”

There’s silence for a moment. “Good question,” Sapnap says, and a slap as George reaches out to hit him.

“We’ve never seen a town this big before,” he admits, shaking out his hand like hitting Sapnap had been like hitting a brick wall. “Usually there’s twenty to fifty, which we can take out from a distance and occasionally popping down close.”

“Well, there’s three of you,” Phil rationalizes, thinking to his own merry band of boys. “And then me, Techno, and Wil. Tommy won’t let us fight without him, and Tubbo’s a good shot, so with all of us it’s...”

“Eight versus one hundred and fifty.” Dream’s voice is flat. “I like those odds.”

“I’m not fighting alongside people I haven’t met,” Sapnap says and Phil glances over, then up at the sky. The moon’s still up high, and there’s time before it really gets to be daytime, so he makes a decision at that moment. Techno will hate it, but the others might not mind.

“Come around for breakfast,” he offers, crossing his arms and watching the three of them snap their heads toward him. He can’t really figure out what’s going on in their heads, which makes him nervous, but he’s taken in everyone else so far and he’s not about to stop now. Not when these three have been so helpful, if not a bit chaotic about it. He’s used to chaos.

“Dream, you know where we are from earlier. Come around in the morning and I’ll introduce you, and we can talk about it more there. I’m not making any decisions tonight-- I want to know what they think. They’re my team.” He also wants to know especially what Techno thinks. He knows he’s spent time around the hoard and the mound and studied them as they formed it in the other town he had been in, so he wants to know if they’re right. If this isn’t some ploy to get under their skins and steal their shit and leave them bleeding. Phil doesn’t

think they'd necessarily win that fight, but they're all easy around a weapon and he doesn't want to fight if he doesn't have to.

The three exchange a look between them.

"Fine with me," Dream shrugs, and Sapnap slips off the porch railing and onto the ground again. "See you in the morning."

"Goodbye--" They're gone before he can really finish the word, the spaces where they had been empty and shadows now bristling with life. He doesn't like *that* one bit, so Phil immediately turns on his heel and heads back towards the house. He's fucking exhausted, and wants to get some sleep before the morning comes and he has to deal with whatever tomorrow will bring.

He is not that lucky.

A shadow looms on their porch and Phil's hand goes to his hip before he realizes who it is. Techno, leaning against the wall and only pushing off as Phil makes his way up the front stairs and around back, towards the back door.

"Where were you?" He questions, and Phil thinks maybe if he pretends not to hear he won't have to answer. "Phil?"

"Couldn't sleep," he replies. Maybe it'll hold off questions. "Went for a walk."

"You went for a walk." Techno's tone makes him stop, hand on the back door and no sounds from inside. He sighs, lifting a hand to his forehead and pressing his fingers against the skin there. It doesn't relieve the pressure, but he can pretend it does. "With four weapons and kitted out in gear fit for some type of war."

"You've got a weapon," Phil points out, and Techno lifts up the sword from where it had been held at his side.

"Well, yeah," he says, sounding confused. "It's the middle of the night."

"Case in point," Phil says, and goes to open the door and drop the bomb. "Tomorrow there are people coming."

"What?" Techno's grip on the sword immediately becomes stronger, and Phil shushes him lightly as they enter the house.

"I went out and found the person from earlier--" he begins to explain.

--without me?"

--and they're coming in the morning to talk about some things." He pushes on despite Techno's interruption, and he can practically feel the upset and indignation coming off of Techno behind him as he pulls his boots off, deposits his axe in its usual corner and sets the few knives he'd brought on the table. He'll put them away later. Next, the jacket comes off.

“You went without me?” Techno leans against the kitchen counter, frowning, sword set to the side and arms crossed.

“Yes, Techno, I did. I wasn’t sure what was going to happen.” Phil keeps his voice low. Wilbur’s asleep in the next room and Tommy and Tubbo just upstairs; he doesn’t want whatever this conversation is to be waking them up. Then he’d have to explain to all of them what’s going on, and that’d be a main in the middle of the night. Better to wait until morning.

“So you went without me. Without backup. Without telling anyone you were going.” He glances over, catching Techno’s eye in the dark and straightening up from where he’d been slipping off his extra layer of pants.

“I didn’t want to worry you--” He starts to explain, but he’s cut off and it catches him by surprise.

“News flash, Phil, you did! I passed by your door and you were just gone! Shoes, gone, axe, gone, I had no idea what to think. What if they’d been hostile?”

“I--” Phil can’t even get a sentence out, and he’s surprised. He’s surprised by the emotion he’s getting from Techno, and he can’t tell if it’s just from how late it is or if something’s cracking.

“You would’ve just left us like that?” He sounds hurt. There’s silence for a moment and Phil finally manages to clear his throat of cotton, pushing past the slight embarrassment to try and explain himself.

“I.. didn’t think you’d care this much.” It sounds weak, even to him. Techno scoffs.

“Do you think we don’t care about you?”

Silence.

“You’re kidding.” Techno stares him down, hair draping over his shoulder and hanging down in sheets. It’s getting long. Phil stares at it like maybe it’ll be an excuse someday. It’s still pink, somehow. Ghostly in the moonlight coming in through the kitchen window. “Phil, come on.”

“I never said I thought that,” he says, trying to defend himself. Of course he knows they care - Tommy and Tubbo at least. Tubbo for sure, Tommy more subtly. Wilbur and Techno are more independent, but he knows they all care. It’d be stupid of him not to know.

“Phil,” Techno says, harsh, angry edges melting away for a split second. “Please don’t make me wake them up someday and tell them you’re gone.”

He licks his lips. “I won’t,” he says, and it’s a promise. He hadn’t thought his midnight trip would worry Techno so much, but the tension in his shoulders is clear, even if it’s dropping from them every second. Phil reaches out, and Techno catches his hand before it reaches his shoulder, fingers warm and tight around his wrist.

The hug is brief, but the warmest thing Phil’s felt in a while.

Sleep doesn't really come for them. Phil's too worried for when the morning comes, and Techno doesn't sleep much anyways. They do part ways to head into their separate bedrooms, but Phil can hear the slight rustling now and again that makes its way through the walls that indicates Techno's active.

Morning comes, light creeping over the horizon, and Phil makes a point to be awake and about first. It's not difficult-- Tommy and Tubbo like to sleep in, and Techno's holed up in his room. Wilbur's the second up after him, partially Phil's fault. It's hard to avoid noise when Wilbur sleeps in their technical kitchen, and Phil wants a cup of tea before everything starts. He digs through their food stores as Wilbur shuffles and groans on the couch, cataloguing what they have in their pantry and what would be a suitable breakfast. If he plans on feeding eight people, well, that's more than their usual five, so he digs and digs into the back until he's found what he's looking for. He and Techno had found it one afternoon in a neighboring town, a box of packaged oatmeal (unopened and entirely sealed) in the pantry of a dilapidated house. It's a rare find, but it's got packets of oatmeal that seems alright when Phil rips open a pack to check. And there's plenty of them, enough to feed more than their usual group for sure. He decides on that, taking the whole box and a pot into the living room.

Routine is good in Phil's brain. It's something he can get used to and understand, so settling into it makes him calmer. He ignores the tired and grouchy Wilbur on the couch in favor of tugging on his boots and heading across the street to their stream, filling up the pot with water, enough for all their morning drinks and the oatmeal on top of it. The whole world is still a bit chilly, birds chirping somewhere in the distance as he glances down the street. The sun's coming up, red and yellows and blues dappling the sky as he stands there in his pajamas and hair down, brushing ticklishly across the back of his neck in a slight breeze. If he pretends, the houses are full of people, sleeping people who are about to wake up and come out, go about their days and fill the streets with life and laughter beyond Phil's own.

His eyes drop to the pavement, where a single vein of green runs halfway down the asphalt, ending meters from their house.

Phil hoists the pot back into his hands from where he'd settled it on his hip and turns on his heel, heading back inside. He's got guests to prepare for.

Wilbur's fully awake by the time he shuts the door behind him, sitting up on the couch and tugging on a yellow jumper that he'd gotten from somewhere. Phil thinks maybe he'd had it in his pack since the beginning, based on how it's ragged in places. Mentally, he adds fixing those holes in the sleeves to his list, then settles the pot of water on the fire that has obviously been stoked.

"Techno been down?" He asks, sort of warily.

"Nope," Wilbur says, humming slightly and voice raspy. "He was up pretty late last night. You were too. Get much sleep?" Phil turns slightly, catching his gaze and then looking away. So Wilbur knew, even if Phil wasn't sure how *much* he knew.

"Enough," he says, although it's a lie. Wilbur scoffs, kicking his blanket off long legs and standing to stretch, back popping and crackling with the movements. "Eugh, Wil."

"What?" Wilbur laughs, twisting his shoulders back and forth and grinning as Phil winces. "I've got crackly bones, Phil. Don't like them?"

"I'm going to find you a chiropractor," Phil huffs, fighting against the smile pulling at his lips. Wilbur is ridiculous sometimes. "Somehow. Somewhere, I'm going to do it. Hunt them down and make them fix your crackly bones."

"Only if you make them fix yours too, old man," Wilbur teases, and of course it's at this moment that Tommy stumbles into the room, rubbing his eyes in irritation.

"Old *men*," he says towards the both of them, his voice pointedly hushed and yet still managing to be loud. "Keep it down, will you? Tubbo's sleeping."

"And you're not?" Phil asks, watching as he brushes past and flops onto the couch. Wilbur tugs at the blanket that Tommy's now sitting on top of, frowning slightly. He tugs again. Phil can already see where this is going.

"No, someone fucking banged the back door and woke me up," Tommy points out, and Phil tips his head to concede. Fair point. He tried not to be loud but it happens sometimes, and Tommy's a light sleeper.

"Get up," Wilbur butts in, tugging at his blanket again. "I want this."

"You get up," Tommy shoots back, even though it doesn't make any sense. "I'm sitting here."

"I sleep there." Wilbur tugs again on the blanket, harder this time. Tommy brings his hands down from where they'd been covering his eyes, glaring in Wilbur's direction.

"Please don't," Phil says, but Tommy talks halfway over him and the words are lost to oblivion. Ah, well. He tried.

"You chose to sleep here! Don't get mad at me, this was our sitting place first. I sat here way before you ever showed up and stuck your big fuckin' nose in places it didn't belong." Tommy tries to sink back into the couch cushions further, like maybe he'll be able to increase his weight and keep himself on the blanket. Wilbur's tugs have got it half loose, but he takes a moment to pause and assess the situation. Phil's got his head in his hand, pressing on the bridge of his nose and trying not to laugh.

"Oh, I didn't belong, did I? Interesting, coming from the single most *useless* human on the planet," Wilbur says, eyes glinting as he leans forward and topples right on top of Tommy. Phil can't help it then, laughing quietly and stifling it with his fingers.

“I am not useless!!!” Tommy roars, banging his fists on Wilbur’s back as his voice is slightly muffled by his shirt. “Let me UP!!”

“Never,” Wilbur says, sing-song and happy to stay where he is it seems. Phil laughs harder, burying his face in his hands and hiccuping slightly, only glancing up when the other two have gone quiet.

“What the hell,” Techno says from his place in the doorway, “are you two doing?”

“Techno!!!!” Tommy sounds both relieved and mortified. “Help! Get his fat arse off me!!”

“Wilbur’s anything but fat,” Techno says, ignoring the muffled groans that are now coming from where Tommy is trapped. He picks his way over to Phil, two mugs clinking together slightly as he comes over and hands over one. Phil gladly takes it, swallowing the last of his laughter in favor of dropping a tea bag in his own and then one for Techno, who takes them both over to the simmering pot of water and fills them up.

“None for me?” Wilbur asks, watching him from his position smothering Tommy to death. Phil takes his mug gratefully, wiping up any drops of hot water that had dripped down the side with his sleeve.

“Phil, if you do not make him let me out, I am going to make you forget women exist again,” Tommy threatens, although it’s not very effective when it’s muffled and coming from Tommy.

“I didn’t forget women existed, Tommy,” Phil sighs, rolling his eyes and waiting for the tea bag to steep, staring down into the deepening liquid. “That didn’t work.”

“It did!!! I gaslighted you!!! It worked!”

“Did not.” Phil blows across the top of his drink, then sips lightly. Beneath Wilbur, Tommy is raging.

“Did too!”

“Did not.”

“Did too!!!!”

“Oh my goood,” Techno drones, lolling his head back and pushing himself to his feet. “I’m getting dressed. Kill Tommy while I’m gone.” More sputtered bits of rage can be heard from under Wilbur as Techno makes his escape, obviously having brushed past Tubbo in the hall as he enters only a moment later, hair mussed and looking slightly flustered.

“Tommy?” It’s the first thing he asks, and Tommy’s legs kick the floor with thuds.

“I’m right here,” he grumbles, banging his fists on Wilbur again. “Help.”

Tubbo takes a moment to absorb the situation, then bursts into laughter.

Eventually, Wilbur lets Tommy out since Phil refuses to get up and make him a cup of tea as well, and Phil has to start the oatmeal for breakfast for all of them. Tommy and Tubbo are still in their pajamas as the food gets ready and as the morning drags on, Phil wonders if his guests are ever going to show. Techno is obviously watching Phil and Phil is obviously watching the door, however neither of the other three seem to catch on. Phil's just about ready to call the whole thing quits when there's a sharp rapping on the front door.

All of their heads shoot up from where they'd been sitting previously, Phil in his chair, Wilbur and Techno on separate sides of the couch and Tommy and Tubbo on the floor. Phil holds his hand out before any of them can go anywhere, pushing himself out of his seat.

"Phil?" Techno asks, standing with him.

"Is someone out there?" Tubbo asks, voice hushed, and Phil nods.

"We have guests coming for breakfast," he says as nonchalantly as he can possibly manage. "Please be reasonable."

"What?" Tommy blinks at him from below, face contorting into a mixture of emotions that Phil isn't ready to face just yet. "What the hell does that mean?"

"I found the people from yesterday," Phil says, and it's dawning on him that maybe he should've explained this earlier to them instead of rushing it now, but it's too late. "Last night. And I invited them to breakfast, because they told me something important."

"What the hell!" Tommy repeats, and both he and Tubbo are now sitting up and watching him closely.

"Is that why you made extra?" Tubbo asks, tipping his head to peer at the pot of oatmeal that's sitting on the fire.

"Yes," Phil says, looking between them. "And they're nice, so you be nice."

"Are you sure about this?" Wilbur asks, and there's another set of knocking, then the faint sound of someone saying "helllloooo" from somewhere on their porch.

"He better be," Techno huffs, brushing past Phil and heading toward the door to open it and let them inside. "Come on."

Phil unlocks the front door carefully. They keep it deadbolted more often than not, with the backdoor being their main entrance in and out of the house, so it takes a second to tug the damn thing open from being stuck in one spot for so long. Once Phil does get it open, he's greeted by that smiling mask and two others on either shoulder.

"Dream," he says, shoving the door open a bit further. "Good morning."

"Morning," Dream says, eyes flicking from Phil's face to over his shoulder, where Phil knows Techno is hovering. Probably with an intimidating stare, too, although it doesn't seem to affect any of them very much. "You offered last night. Still on the table?"

“Of course.” Phil pushes the door open until it finally touches the wall, stepping to the side and gesturing for them to come in. Techno also shifts to the side, and Phil nods in his direction. “This is Techno.”

“Hallo,” Techno says, and there’s a layer of distrust under the normally cool exterior he puts off as the others step inside and Phil shuts the door behind him. There’s shuffling from the other room, then Tommy is in the doorway of the living room and staring. A moment later, Tubbo’s hair can be seen under his elbow, trying to poke through as well.

“You didn’t say there’d be three of them!” Tommy says, indignant and clearly suspicious. “Phil, what the fuck!”

This is fine, Phil thinks to himself, pushing onwards and nudging Tommy back into the living room. “Sit,” he encourages him, glancing around the space. Fuck, he is so *not* prepared for anything of this caliber-- their living room isn’t huge, and fitting eight people is going to be interesting. He hopes they don’t see sitting on the floor as an insult. He definitely should’ve thought this through more, or given himself a day to prepare and explain. What the hell had he even been thinking last night?

Well, he’s got to deal with it now.

Dream’s the first to poke his head into the living room. He takes two steps forward, then immediately freezes in his boots. Across from him, Wilbur’s eyes have gone slightly wide. This wouldn’t be a problem, really, if they hadn’t both immediately glared at each other once the surprise had passed.

“Dream,” Wilbur says, and his voice is like ice. Tommy lets out a low “oooooo.”

“Wilbur,” Dream says, and there’s something under the thin veneer of politeness he’s exuding that makes Phil’s hackles raise. “Start any new cults since the last time we saw you?”

That’s… news. Phil glances between the two and beside him he can tell Techno is bristling with anxiety, so he decides to step in before anyone can say anything else. “Okay!” He says, clapping his hands together loudly and making sure to startle nearly everyone in the room. “Dream, come on in, you’re leaving George and Sapnap in the hallway and that’s hardly polite. There’s oatmeal-- I said I’d give you breakfast, after all. Whatever this is--” he points between Wilbur and Dream, “--is going to be explained, but after you sit your asses down.”

Dream fixes him with a stare that he can’t decipher and doesn’t really want to. Phil stares back.

Dream shrugs, and continues into the living room. Behind him are George and Sapnap, who had been peering over his shoulder the entire time, and are equally as icy towards Wilbur, but that’s not a surprise. Wilbur is silent, watching them with care and gripping his mug so hard that Phil thinks it might shatter. They manage in the small room, sitting in various spots as Phil pretends he’s not worried. Techno stays by the door and unsurprisingly, Tubbo’s the one to break the silence again.

“You’re American?” He asks, and Dream turns to glance at him, then nods.

“I am too,” Sapnap calls out, raising a hand and grinning slightly. “I used to have a cowboy hat, but uh,”

“It got burnt.” George rolls his eyes, finishing the story for him. “These two idiots were visiting me when everything struck,” he explains, looking over at Tubbo and seeming a bit uncomfortable. “We’d been internet friends before that.”

“Tommy and I were internet friends!! And real life friends. But we texted a *lot*,” Tubbo explains, Tommy crossing his arms beside him. He’s just as icy as Wilbur. Phil sort of expected that, based on how Tommy’s taken a shine to following the older around and copying a lot of what he’s been doing lately. Phil’s suddenly grateful for Tubbo’s tendency to ramble and make people feel at home; it’s certainly helpful now, as he busies himself with getting everyone food and trying to tune himself out of the awkward, lilted conversation that they’re holding. Tubbo at least seems unaware of the tension-- or, rather, he’s ultra-aware and *winks* at Phil when he hands over a bowl of steaming breakfast.

Phil is so grateful for Tubbo.

“Alright,” he says once he’s got everything set up and has handed out meals. Wilbur’s hands are now gripping tight to a spoon instead of his mug. Phil is perched on the arm of his chair, resting mostly above the rest of the room, so it’s easy for their attention to turn to him. He points from Wilbur to Dream, then gestures sort of vaguely at George and Sapnap. “Explain. You know each other?”

“Sort of,” Dream says, and Wilbur’s rolling his eyes.

“By sort of,” he says, leaning forward slightly. “He means that we knew each other for a good year and a half. There was a compound we were both staying in for a while.”

“Until you and that other guy tore it apart,” Sapnap snaps. Wilbur shrugs, and Phil is so unsure of where to go from here.

“Wilbur?” Tommy’s the first to cut in, tipping his head to stare. “What the fuck are they talking about?” Wilbur stares right back, then sighs.

“It was about a year ago,” he starts, waving a hand in the air. “When everything went to shit. And we’d been in the compound for a year or so before that. It was safe. It was well-protected and had some good shit in there. Some guy-- his name was Bad, he’d been a doomsday prepper or something. He shared it with us and whoever stumbled up to the front door.

Terrible in hindsight, really. He let anyone in, as long as they weren’t outwardly suspicious. So one day this guy shows up and we let him in and help him out and he rooms with me. His name was...” Wilbur trails off at this point, staring at his hands. There’s a few long seconds before Dream pipes up.

“Schlatt,” he says. “His name was Schlatt.”

"Yeah," Wilbur says, voice croaking a bit. "Schlatt. He was my friend. We got along really fuckin' well, messing around. He was charismatic. Funny. A jackass. Ambitious. It started one day six months after he'd showed up. He pulled me aside one day while we were out in the streets, looking for any dead people to dispatch, and he told me his plan. He wanted to throw Bad out-- he didn't like how he ran things. He thought there was something to take. Power, food, I don't know. He was just ambitious. And he had people already behind him, who thought the same. The compound wasn't huge-- maybe thirty people? At most. Schlatt had ten of them on his side by that point."

Wilbur laughs, pressing his hand to his forehead then. It's not a happy laugh. Phil's head is reeling. None of them spoke about their pasts much, but Wilbur had never even hinted about something like this. Tommy and Tubbo definitely slipped up at times, and Phil had called all of them by different names at some point, people he'd known from before. But Wilbur never had. He'd always danced around the topic, cautious but unsuspicious.

"What could I say? No?" Wilbur's voice is strained. "Of course I said yes, even if I didn't exactly agree. I thought maybe I could change his ideals-- shift him away from a total takeover and instead just implement new ideas with Bad." His voice goes low and Phil's stomach drops with it. Instead of continuing, Wilbur just sits there. Dream picks it up after a minute of aching silence.

"Schlatt got about half the compound on his side, in the end," he says. His voice is much more clinical of the situation than Wilbur's was, and when Phil looks at him his face is unreadable with the mask in place. "And they lost. They managed to burn down half the place in the process, and most of the food. Bad got hurt. He's fine now, but it was pretty touch and go for a while. The first thing we did once everyone was stable was kick Schlatt and Wilbur out."

"I didn't know that he was going to go that far," Wilbur insists, lifting his head from his hands where he'd been tugging at the strands anxiously. "The moment we got kicked out I punched him. Then I left. I haven't seen him in awhile. I don't even know if he's alive. Hopefully not." Something in his tone makes Phil think maybe he doesn't actually hope that. Wilbur raises his head then, and from under his bangs he stares at Dream and the two with him. "I've moved on," he says quietly. The room is deathly silent.

Until--

"That's not really a cult," Tubbo says from his seat on the floor, visibly shrinking a bit when all the eyes in the room turn to him. "I mean. You said he started a cult. He didn't."

"No," Techno says from beside Phil. "He co-ran a rebellious sect. I can kind of get behind that."

"Phil, are we a re- bell- ious sect?" Tubbo turns to stare at him. Phil can't help himself-- he laughs. Everything is so stilted and awkward, the tension in the room suffocating, but he can't help himself.

"No, Tubbo," he says after he composes himself, holding a hand to his face like it might hide the red on his cheeks. He's slightly embarrassed, and now everyone's looking at him.

“There’s nothing to rebel against here. We work as a team.”

“Well, I mean, Wil’s president--”

“Not officially. We work together. We make decisions together. Which is why I invited you here.” Phil turns to Dream, catching his gaze. “Because this affects all of us. And it’s important.”

“Didn’t stop you before,” Techno mutters, and Phil winces a bit. It’s not the time for this argument, so he chooses to ignore the quip in favor of pressing onwards.

“Want to sum up what you told me last night?” He asks Dream, who tears his gaze away from Wilbur and instead looks around.

“We can get rid of the spore center, basically. And the majority of the zombies.” Dream delivers it without any grandeur, and based on Tommy’s shocked reaction, it’s not what any of his boys were expecting.

“What?”

“It’s all in the flame, baby.” Sapnap flicks his lighter open again, but it’s less ominous with the bright sunlight shining in through the windows. Now he just looks a little like an over-enthusiastic dork, albeit with a tendency for arson. “Burn it down, and it stays gone. Makes it safer to operate.”

“We’ve been going around and destroying centers one by one,” Dream cuts in, and then he’s pulling out a map from his backpack. It’s aged and stained with multiple degrees of color, but the red marks are clear. The coming speech sounds practiced. “Each mark is a town we’ve cleared. That’s where most of the centers pop up, but there were a few in random spots too.” The map is littered with marks, painting a clear picture of their route as they had made their way to this town. Phil’s not exactly sure what the name of this place was, but Dream points to a spot on the map that makes vague sense. “This is where we are now. We’re heading to London. We’re going to burn it to the ground.”

“Ambitious,” Wilbur says. It’s the first word he’s said in a while.

“And suicidal,” Tommy scoffs from beside Tubbo. “Have you seen London? It’s a fucking deathtrap. You’ll never make it in, much less get out without getting sick or some shit. Trust me.”

“Yeah? Why should I trust you? You’re a kid,” Dream says, challenging a bit. Tommy bristles.

“I fucking know,” he spits, leaning forward to plop a finger on the map, right on top of London. “because I’ve seen it. Tubbo has too. We were lucky enough to know to stay clear. And I’m *not* a kid.”

Dream glances to either side, and Phil recognizes the look they share. He’s worn the same expression with Techno before, with Wilbur, with Tubbo, even Tommy. It’s a look that’s

exchanged when things are going to shit, but the ones expressing it still have hope. They're still determined. George speaks up, voice lilting slightly as he stares at the map.

"We're still going to try," he says, reaching out. In his hand is a red marker that squeaks slightly against the paper when he draws a circle around London. "Imagine if we burnt London and it's dead down. Then Manchester. And York. Everything. Look at what we've done already, and it's only been a few months! We could get rid of the threat and start a real effort to rebuild. We're an island, technically. Cut off from the mainland. Isolated enough that there's no real threat from anywhere except the existing spores. If we eradicate them, we're safe."

The room is silent for a long moment.

"Like I said," Wilbur pipes up, lounging back into the couch cushions and dragging his gaze from George, to Sapnap, to Dream. "Ambitious."

"Right crazy," Phil mutters, because it is. The chances of surviving that many close calls is almost impossible. Even with the number of smaller towns they'd cleared, he distinctly recalls the conversation from last night and the danger of taking down as many dead as they have now. Then he imagines London and it's thousands upon thousands of walking dead-- it seems inconceivable.

"This is why we're practicing in smaller towns and centers first," Dream says, tapping the map with one finger. "So we get the hang of how it works. Your center will be a step up, really. It's more than we're used to. We could do it, but if you all help, it'll be much easier."

Techno leans forward over Phil's shoulder, interest obviously piqued. In his hand is a little black notebook, the one he keeps in the pocket over his chest, and the one he'd scribbled in that day so many months ago when Phil had first met him. "Interestin'," he says, flipping it open. "And what exactly would be the plan?"

They eat breakfast, and they scheme.

Dream is enthusiastic, and George and Sapnap are too. They outline their ideas clearly to them, showing them the trail they've marked on the map that they're going to take. They talk about their friends and the contacts they've made over their travels-- Bad's name makes Wilbur's shoulders shoot up to his ears, but he slowly contributes more and more to the conversation as the morning drags on into afternoon. Any bad blood seems to have been put aside for the moment so they can discuss plans, and discuss they do. Techno brings out another notebook, this time with a detailed map of the town they have resided in for the past year and traces lines down the streets, telling them all about the spores and roots he'd traced as far as he could. Phil is mildly surprised by the amount of detail, even down to the placements of the flags on houses in the map Techno had shown them. He stares at the

depiction of their house, and the scribbled moniker underneath it (*home*). When he manages to pull his eyes away, he can see the slightest upturn to the corners of Techno's mouth.

In the end, their idea is simple.

Dream will wake up one of the zombies and initiate their defense. They are a hivemind, but they are not cognizant of any battle techniques. Once the majority of them have spread out and been taken down, then Sapnap and Tubbo will approach the center and light it up before anyone can get hurt. George and Wilbur will be on a roof overlooking the town square where the center is, armed with crossbows and bolts. The rest of them will form a sort of curved trapezoid-- Tommy and Tubbo in the back, with Dream, Techno, Phil, and Sapnap in the front. Once the dead are awake, they'll slowly spread out to draw them apart and leave enough of an opening for Sapnap and Tubbo to get through.

It's simple and terrible and Phil has no idea if it will work. He's hoping it will.

"It's not the most nuanced thing," Techno says, staring at the diagram in front of them. Tommy had scribbled a hat onto the stick figure that represented Phil, and now Tubbo's busy drawing tiny bugs along the side of the paper, detailed to a minuscule degree. "But you know what they say. In the middle of chaos is opportunity."

"You are so fuckin' weird," Tommy chimes in from his place on the floor, laying face down in the carpet.

"Yeah, sure," Techno replies, and Phil just laughs. Beside him, he can hear Dream wheeze slightly.

"Stay the night," Phil offers. Dream shakes his head.

"We'll be fine. We all need a few days to prepare, I think. We can stay out somewhere," he says, looking down at where Tubbo is clearly asleep, sprawled across Tommy's lap and hanging half off the couch. "This place is kind of full anyways."

"A bit," Phil admits. "The house across the way is fairly clean. We've cleared this whole street, so you'll be fine wherever you go."

"Thanks," George says, suppressing a yawn and shoving Sapnap's arm off of his shoulders with a huff. Sapnap grins, saluting Phil as he makes his way past and down the front hall.

"Night," Phil says, raising a hand in goodbye. They leave the house without too much fanfare, and suddenly everything seems a bit quieter than before.

"That was interesting," Wilbur says. Techno is leaned over the map of the town, the ripped-out stick figures of all of them decorating the square. He shifts one slightly to the left. Phil sighs, pressing his fingers to the center of his forehead.

"Says you, the cult leader," Tommy mumbles, careful to keep his voice low and aware of Tubbo in his lap. "What was with that?"

Silence. Then, "It was a mistake," Wilbur says. "That's what it was."

Tommy seems to know better than to press any more. Tubbo hangs off his shoulder as they make their way upstairs, muttering goodnights, and then it's three. Then two. Then one, left alone with the smoldering ash of a fire and the soft sounds of sleep from the couch opposite him.

Phil breathes.

The next two days are a flurry of activity.

It's been a while since they've had anything major to prepare for. Phil finds himself digging through the closets and boxes and extra rooms as Techno hands him lists of things they'll need. According to Techno and his obsessive research, they need to layer up. Goggles, facemasks, layers of clothing, especially if they're going to be up close to the spore center. Dream agrees, and Phil's tasked with suiting them all up with extra layers of clothing. Tommy complains that it's too hot and Phil agrees in his head, but like he tells Tommy, it's better than getting sick. Half of the first day preparing is spent doing that, and once everyone's been kitted, he starts ripping cotton sheets into long bandage sections and boiling them. Just in case. He also checks their medkit and consolidates their items with George's, the kit he has small and carried just on his hip in a box. He hopes they won't need it.

Techno spends his time with Dream in the living room, hunched over the map and exchanging notes on the spores and disease. Wilbur makes himself scarce for a bit, but eventually he joins Phil in the bowels of their storage, quietly hiding. Phil says nothing about it. Tommy and Tubbo are recruited by George and Sapnap, stockpiling the weaponry they have. Techno has his sword, but George sets Tommy to work making more crossbow bolts. Phil hadn't even thought of making their own before-- they'd always just gone back and pulled them out once they'd been used as long as it was safe. Over dinner the first night George explains how to do it, showing Phil how to wrap shards of metal over a wooden shaft. It's stupidly simple, and with the amount of abandoned scrap metal they have plenty of sharp things to use as tips. That night is cozier than the previous, even though they're all nervous.

Tommy ducks under Techno's sword, glaring at him when he pops back up.

"You're gonna take my fucking head off," he whines, glancing to the side. Phil's on the porch, watching George and Tubbo farther down the street where they're aiming at random targets with the new bolts.

"Might be quieter like that," Techno says dryly, coming at him again. Tommy swings his own weapon, gritting his teeth as the two clash and shudders rack down his arms.

“Bitch,” he says, glancing towards Phil again. The other guy is there-- Tommy thinks his name is Dream? What a weird fucking name. Granted, he’s friends with a guy named Technoblade, but whatever. He likes to make fun of things he doesn’t understand. Techno has apparently noted the fact that Tommy is sick and tired of practicing the same maneuver eight times in a row, and the tip of his sword bumps into Tommy’s torso (soft enough so it doesn’t pierce through). Tommy drags his eyes back to Techno and finds him looking as well, as soft words float through the air when Dream strikes up conversation with Phil. They’re too far off to hear what they’re saying, but surely it’s about their plan.

“Do you think we can trust them?” Techno asks, and Tommy looks over at him. He shrugs.

“Why’re you asking me?” He asks. Techno urges him back into position, and Tommy plants his feet. “No one’s bothered to ask so far.”

“Because I value your opinion.” Techno rolls his wrist and the sword flurries around in a circle. Tommy scoffs. Show off. He takes the moment as a distraction, lunging forward in the middle of the action.

“I think--” he says, grunting slightly when Techno parries him off easily. “--that they’re weird. And I don’t like how they’re here in L’Manberg. But I don’t think they’re lying to us.” He steps to the side, easily dodging one of Techno’s near-silent swings. The blade whooshes past his face. “I think we utilize their strength,” and then he ducks, “and get rid of the issue in the middle of town.”

“Manipulative,” Techno says, and Tommy grins at him, teeth bared. “Tubbo’s been rubbing off on you.” The smile falls, but not all the way. Tommy suppresses a laugh in favor of lunging forward and blindly hitting out at Techno.

“Fuckin’ rude!” He crows as he does, and then he’s on the ground and his machete is out of hand and clattering to the pavement. Techno stands above him for a second, point of sword on his chest, and then pulls back. Offers Tommy a hand. He hesitates for a second before taking it, swaying once he’s on his feet and brushing the dust off his pants. “Do you trust them?”

Techno hums. “No,” he eventually says. “But I don’t trust many people.”

“Cept us,” Tommy points out, dancing onto one foot and leaning out to elbow Techno in the ribs.

“Definitely not you,” Techno deadpans, leaning down to scoop up the machete and dodge Tommy’s boney elbows all at once. Tommy knows he doesn’t mean it. “And certainly not them. But everything they’ve told me lines up with the stuff I already know. So. Like you said. Utilize their strength.”

“Manipulative,” Tommy says, deepening his voice in imitation.

“Shut the fuck up,” Techno says, hiding his smile by rustling Tommy’s hair with no small amount of aggression.

Wilbur and Sapnap sit on opposite seats, each purposefully not looking at the other and trying to focus on their own tasks. Wilbur's isn't necessarily the most important thing in the world. He's got his lyrics notebook out, pen in hand, twirling between his fingers as he doodles L'Manberg's flag in the dead space. Across from him, he knows Sapnap is busy with their stupid map and the marks across it. Wilbur hadn't missed how the spot where the compound had been was slashed over in red, George later explaining that the letters beside the mark were people who they'd asked for help. The small "B" haunts him, even if he'd pushed it aside.

It had been a year since he'd last seen Bad, and it had been on horrible terms. He can remember the smell of smoke, and someone screaming-- he thinks it was Skeppy, maybe, since Skeppy and Wilbur had been the ones to drag Bad out of the smoke and into the light. Wilbur hadn't meant for anyone to get hurt, was the thing.

Between his fingers, the pencil snaps.

"Shit," he mutters, staring down at the broken pieces. He ignores how Sapnap's head flicks upwards, eyes trailing him as he unfurls from his curled position on the couch and rifles through one of the pencil cans on the mantle until he finds another sharp one. None of them are sharp, tips either snapped at the end or too dull to be of use. With a sigh, he snags one of the dull ones and prepares himself to sharpen it with one of the smaller knives.

Sapnap is holding out a pen. He clicks it once with his thumb. Wilbur stares.

"Here," he says, not looking up from his map. "It works."

"I like to use pencils," Wilbur says like an idiot.

"All I got's pen." It almost sounds apologetic. Sapnap should not be the one apologizing here, so Wilbur sucks it up and reaches out to take the pen. He'd never known Sapnap well-- the other had been quiet and unassuming, hiding behind his friends enough to never stand out in Wilbur's eyes. He knew he wasn't a bad person or anything. He seemed nice.

"Thanks," Wilbur says. And then a moment later-- "Sorry."

"Not even an inconvenience, bud." Sapnap turns the map, the shuffling of paper filling the room with ambient noise as Wilbur goes over to sit by his notebook again. "I have plenty."

Somehow, Wilbur thinks they're both talking about the same thing without actively saying it.

The days pass. It's time.

Chapter End Notes

a cliffhanger!

so, a lot happens this chapter. it was actually longer, too, but i decided to break it up a bit more. SBI are all together! woo! and we're introduced to the dream team!

i wonder what happens next....

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

thank you for coming along this journey with me :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

(It's time.)

Phil has checked and double-checked everyone's outfits. Over and over he's gone over their plan in his head, calculating and careful and terrified. Even Techno is visibly nervous right now, bouncing slightly on his toes every time he stands and obsessively checking his body for weaponry at any moment. Tommy and Tubbo haven't left each other's sides, and even Dream and George and Sapnap have been visibly on edge.

"Ready?" Dream asks from his position in front of the group. They're at the town square now, the sun high in the sky. If Phil had to guess, he would say it's around noon. He's warm, under all the layers of clothes he's wearing, but it's necessary. He'd rather be sweaty than dead.

"We're good, big D!" calls Tommy from behind. Tubbo's voice follows, nervous laughter.

From behind them, there's George's shout and Wilbur's from a building a bit farther away. They've got crossbows and bolts for ages, safer up in the buildings and ready to cover from above.

"Ready," says Techno, bouncing.

Sapnap just nods.

Phil's hands are shaking.

"Ready," he says, and Dream nods quietly before heading up toward the mass of bodies in the center of the plaza. Phil grips his axe tight and prepares himself.

He cannot lose any of them today.

It takes a second for the world to explode. In fact, it actually happens much slower than Phil had been expecting. Dream chops the head of one of the dead off without preamble, the sound of flesh and bone cracking as the body falls with a thump, head rolling. Phil follows it for a moment with his eyes, then glances up again.

The mass of bodies is shifting.

It starts with a few that break off from the outside first, seeking them with clicking noises and terrible screeches. They're easily silenced, one by a bolt that goes right through the eye.

Above them, George cheers triumphantly. Dream gives him a thumbs up, and they spread out slightly. Phil's starting to think maybe this won't be as bad as they had prepared for-- if the zombies keep coming at such a slow rate, beating them will simply be an exercise in patience, not skill.

Then all hell breaks loose.

Once, Phil had stood on the edge of a lake in summer. He'd tasted rain in the air-- he had all day, in fact. Lightening and thunder was thick on his tongue, yet he didn't bother to go inside just yet where his family waited. Instead, he'd stared across the water and watched as the rain slowly came towards him. He could see it approaching across the flat surface of the pond, from his spot on the dock. Instead of running back, he stood, and waited. When the rain hit, it was like a sheet of water-- thick, plastering his hair to his face. He'd felt alive in that moment, rain filling up his mouth and ears and eyes and coming with such spontaneity it was almost like a flash flood he'd read about in books.

This is like that moment, come again to haunt him.

Instead of rain, however, it's decayed human bodies and the smell of rotting flesh. They break from their formation around the center of the plant life and reach out with terrifying fingers, their only goal to rip and kill and pass on the deadly disease, to protect whatever was at the center of their hive. They come in waves, breaking through their carefully crafted lines and ripping the plan from the notebook to step on it. Their plan, which had been to stay together as much as they could-- drifts into oblivion as mindless monsters tear through their formation and surround them each.

Phil doesn't think anymore. He just does. He falls into a rhythm of defense, slashing and hacking and hitting all the vital spots he possibly can. It's still a team effort yes-- he'll see bodies go down around him as they're killed from the sky, either Wilbur or George-- but physically he's alone. It's not ideal, but somehow, he makes it work.

Occasionally, he sees the others. Dream takes down a zombie behind him, grinning and laughing in a breathless, maniacal way that sort of makes Phil worried for his sanity. He gets glimpses of Tommy and Tubbo, back to back and Tommy with eyes so sharp they nearly serve as a third weapon other than the blades in his hand, Tubbo laser-focused. Techno occasionally manages to get to him, patting a hand on his shoulder and meeting his gaze for a brief moment as they work together to take down a few enemies at a time. Sapnap is a blur of movement the whole time, practically, and occasionally the smell of burnt flesh with worm it's way into Phil's throat.

Slowly, the numbers start to thin out. Slowly, they start to feel victorious. But it's short-lived as there's a wave of *more* and suddenly Phil's being pushed back again.

It's had to have been less than a half hour, and yet. His arms ache. His shoulders moreso. He thinks he's bleeding somewhere but he's not too sure based on how much gore is spattered

across his clothing. Everything has faded into mindless hacking at limbs and monsters. It surprises Phil how much he doesn't care anymore, how their faces (or what's left of them) don't even register as human.

Things take a turn for the worse when Tommy takes a spill onto the ground and doesn't get up. Sapnap is standing over him when Phil gets a good look after hearing his panicked shout, panting hard and terrified more than he'd ever admit. Words are shouted over the sound of the dead, and all Phil hears really is *ankle*. Tommy's moving through, fingers scrabbling against asphalt and hand finding his weapon again, which calms Phil's frantic heart to some degree. Unfortunately, now they're a person down and as hard as Phil fights to get close to Tommy, it's not really working. They're too close to the center of the hoard. Dream and Techno are off somewhere-- Phil is lagging slightly and Sapnap is looking weary and Tommy is struggling back to his feet.

"SAPNAP!" Tubbo's shout is clear over the sounds of the ambient noise of fighting, and Phil snaps his head to the side. Tubbo. He'd nearly forgotten him entirely.

He fights to get a look over the dead he's holding off, risking slicing one's head off as he ducks to the side, feet pressing into the ground hard enough he can feel the stones through the soles of his shoes. Finally, he gets a glance of the kid-- he's directly in front of the mass of moss, holding a hand out and the other occupied with the can of gas. Phil had missed whatever he'd shouted next, but he sees the glint of metal as a lighter is thrown from Sapnap's hand to Tubbo's own. He fumbles with it for a minute, then turns and sprints. There aren't too many zombies in that area, as they'd all spread out to defend earlier, so he clammers on top of the pile of moss with ease.

Phil realizes what he's going to do a second before it happens.

Tubbo digs his hands into the soft flesh of the moss and shuts his eyes as a cloud of spores puffs up from it, hitting him directly in the face.

Phil hardly has time to think the word *no* before he's occupied again, a dead hand grasping onto his shirt sleeve and forcing him to defend himself. He can feel panic rising in his gut as he takes care of the two deadwalkers in front of him, and then sprints as fast as he can toward where he'd seen Tubbo climb the pile. He doesn't dare touch it himself, ducking under the flailing arm of a deadwalker and bringing his axe up to chop it off at the shoulder.

"TUBBO!" He shouts, and he can hear Tommy yelling something similar across the street. He can't see Techno, but that's probably for the best. On a rooftop to his left, George is staring with his crossbow seemingly forgotten in limp hands.

Tubbo's hands are entirely dug into the moss, a few deadwalkers sensing the disturbance and starting to turn in the direction of the pile. His face seems to be plastered in a layer of greenish-brown, dust coating his hair and arms and sleeves. Phil's been around him long enough to recognize the determined look on his face. It's the same one he gets whenever he's reading a book or staring down a particularly hard sudoku, it's the look he gets whenever Tommy suggests a new mischievous idea or whenever Wilbur asks for help with a lyric. He's

seen it directed his way whenever they work in the garden or fail at a new recipe. Beside him is the tub of gasoline, and after a second Tubbo pulls his hands from the hole he'd dug and turns to the can, uncapping it.

Phil loses what happens next due to a zombie stumbling his way, but he dispatches it quickly with a surge of desperation.

When he looks back again, Tubbo's scrambling backwards and frantically flicking the lighter in his hand. It takes three tries to light.

He throws it and scrambles away.

The pile of moss goes up in flames.

Around Phil slowly rises an unholy screeching noise. It takes him a second to understand where it's coming from, but when he realizes it, he's horrified. The zombies are no longer interested in any of them-- instead, they're shrieking, crying, wailing in a horrifically inhuman way. They haven't been human for a long, long time, and this just cements it in his mind. As if on cue, the remaining dead shift on their heels and stumble, flailing towards the center of the flames. Phil wonders if they think they can save it, or save themselves, but they just prove to be suicidal in the most helpful of ways. The first body goes cartwheeling through the flames, only to emerge on the other side and crash into its brethren. From there, they start to pile, throwing themselves at the center of the bonfire like it might do anything to stop it. It doesn't. In fact, the flames just flicker higher, and the screeching slowly fades out as bodies and flora burn.

Phil can feel the heat from meters away, and the smell is ten times more acrid.

Someone shouts something over the flames, and then Techno's by his side. He doesn't miss how the other checks him up and down for injuries, and Phil does the same. But Techno appears to be fine-- just winded. There's hardly even a mark on him. They stare at each other for a minute as the fire rages on, the wind fanning it higher and higher. If they weren't in the center of the town plaza, Phil would almost be worried that the whole town was going to ignite. That would be a shame. He liked this place. His thoughts are rolling a hundred miles a minute as the fire roars, and then he sees Tommy. Limping, but alive.

"Where's Tubbo?" He shouts over the flames, and Phil's stomach drops.

Sapnap catches up to Tommy, catching him by the shoulder as they stare at the pile of writhing bodies, the thick black smoke starting to trail up into the sky, and Phil can feel his fingers shaking with the simple effort of keeping his axe in hand. He can't even tell what color the blade is under it, and after a second, simply drops it in order to focus on going over to Tommy.

"He was on the other side," Phil says, having to raise his voice just to be heard. "Tommy, he--" He's cut off as Tommy just goes, limping without hesitation on an ankle that's definitely not normal. Phil moves to follow, but a hand on his shoulder stops him for just a moment.

“Hey,” Techno says, once again over the flames. His eyes look exhausted. “Did you see what he did?” Phil knows what he’s talking about in a second, and nods. Techno stares at him for a long, long moment, and then turns. Phil follows his gaze, and finds Wilbur and George down already, off the roof. Wilbur’s already right behind them, eyes blazing, but George is back a bit, fingers tight in Dream’s sleeve.

“Hey,” Techno calls, and Wilbur snaps his attention from the flames to him. He holds out a hand, and without another word being passed between them, Wilbur slaps the crossbow in his hands.

Phil can hear the sound of the string and bolt being loaded like a gunshot, horrible consequences falling into place in his mind. Techno’s face is blank. Wilbur might be crying, but it’s impossible to tell from behind the glasses. Nothing feels real in this moment, he thinks. Now that his body has nothing to do, nothing to fight, he’s standing here, and feels utterly helpless.

Somehow, Techno steps up. “Go get Tommy,” he says, gesturing to where Tommy’s limping ahead of them, circling the flames. “Get him out of here. Before--”

“Don’t,” Wilbur says, muffled behind his mask and sounding wildly upset. “Just. Don’t.”

Phil is numb. Techno’s hands are steady on the wood of the crossbow.

The three of them share a glance, and then Wilbur is carefully stepping over the carnage below them and following Tommy’s shape, who’s just turning the corner around the fire. Phil inhales, exhales, and then does the same. He doesn’t look back at Techno-- he doesn’t think he can bear it right now, the implication of what must be done. Ahead of them, Tommy’s disappeared. Beside them, the fire roars. It’s already died down just a tad, but the flames are still high enough that they nearly kiss the sky. The smoke is acrid in his lungs, and so they skirt it for the most part. It’s so loud (is it the fire or the blood rushing through his ears?) that Phil nearly misses the first shout. He doesn’t miss the second, or the shrill screaming that’s certainly Tommy.

“Shit,” Wilbur says, then louder. “SHIT!”

Ahead of them, around the corner, Phil can see two shapes. One is certainly Tommy, bright red and white and heading over toward a lump on the ground, screaming. The lump is moving, slightly, and Phil is certain it’s Tubbo. Tommy is-- Tommy is too close to him for what they’d seen earlier, and all of the sudden he’s running. He’s running to either stop Tommy or grab him or something--

He’s too late. Of course he’s too late, because one of his knees gives out and he’s spilling onto the pavement and scraping his face all up, he’s sure. Wilbur’s already beside him as he struggles upwards, and then they’re both shouting.

“Tommy--”

“TOMMY!”

But Tommy ignores them, and reaches Tubbo. Tubbo, who had just had a bucket of spores thrown into his face not moments before setting the whole place on fire. Tubbo, who even from this distance looks like he's bleeding. Or burnt. Or a mix of the two, the majority of his left shoulder and arm singed and exposed to the air, as well as part of his chest and face.

Tommy's hunched over him, but Wilbur and Phil don't dare step any closer. Phil forces himself as close as he can bear to get-- he wants to get closer. He does. He wants it more than anything he's felt before in his life. But the survival instincts kick in before all else, and Tommy and Tubbo are not safe to be around in this moment. He feels sick to his stomach when forced to think about it, but he tries to fight past it.

"Tommy!" Wilbur shouts again, and Tommy looks up now, face snapping up and clearly streaked with tears and soot, the two mixing and painting trails down his cheeks.

"Why aren't you helping?" He roars over to them, glancing back down at Tubbo. "He's HURT. Get something! Do something! PHIL!"

"Tommy," Phil says, and he can't feel his hands. Around them, the world burns. "Tommy, you--"

"He was infected," Wilbur calls over to him, and Phil watches as Tommy turns his head from them to Tubbo, then back. He looks terribly confused, angry, upset. The soot is still staining his face. Phil thinks back to a culture he'd once read about, sometime over the winter, where mourners had spread charcoal and soot over their faces to symbolize grieving and pay their respects. In this moment, he wants to join Tommy, wants to dig his hands into the coals and drag them down his face to feel the burn. Instead, however, he does nothing. In his silence, Wilbur ends up explaining. "Tommy, he was the one who started the fire. He was covered in spores. There's nothing-- he's going to die anyways, Tommy, and now you--" Wilbur cuts himself off, slamming his fist into an open palm and breathing hard. "Stupid fucking kids! God, Tommy, why do you always have to barge into shit without thinking?"

Tommy blinks, and.... seems unphased by his death sentence. Instead, he turns to inspect Tubbo again, settling him with a hand on his unburnt shoulder when he clearly shifts in discomfort. The tension in the air is thick enough to cut through with a knife, or maybe an axe, or a sword.

Techno is beside Phil now, he realizes, and might be the only reason Phil is actually still standing. He's still got the crossbow in hand, a bag of bolts clearly donated by George on his hip. He's frowning.

Tommy looks over at them all, then back down, and does not respond. Distantly, Phil recognizes Dream and the rest of them, standing in a huddle behind Wilbur and Phil and Techno. Wilbur paces, Techno stands, and Phil shakes.

Tommy hooks his hands under Tubbo's shoulders and starts to drag him away from the fire, towards a building.

"I can handle it--" Dream is speaking somewhere behind Phil, probably to Techno, who is shaking his head sternly.

"This is our issue," Techno says, and Phil watches as Tommy settles Tubbo down away from the flames, ankle still clearly bothering him but utterly ignoring it as he sits down beside, starts to peel away clothing from the worst of the burns. "We can deal with it."

"You're about to have to shoot those two kids," says Dream, and his voice is both flat and harsh at the same time. It drags Phil out of his reverie watching Tommy, and turns his head, staring at Dream and Techno now instead. "One to put out of his misery, one to keep from hurting all of you. The freshly-sick are the worst to fight off. You'll have to do it soon."

"Please," Phil says, cutting them off before the urge to throw up releases itself. "Please stop."

"Phil," Techno says. His voice is incredibly soft. "You and Wil should go back to the house—"

"Absolutely not." Phil snaps, interrupting him, but he doesn't care. "No. I'm staying. I don't care. I want to be here to. To." He's not sure why he wants to stay so badly, but he does. He shouldn't want to stay. And yet, here he is, his feet glued to the pavement.

"Phil," Wilbur says, a hand landing on his shoulder. Phil flinches.

"You can go if you want, Wilbur," he says, and Wilbur stares at him, then ducks his head to the side and brings their attention to the kid shouting their names.

"PHIL!" Tommy shouts, from the sidewalk where he'd settled with Tubbo. His face is pinched, and Phil resists the urge to step forward and over to him and crush him in a hug. "Phil, listen to me!"

Phil pretends like they weren't just discussing Tommy's imminent death, pulls up his mask, and takes a few steps closer. The fire warms his back, but the front of him is deadly cold. The irony of that dichotomy is not lost on him. Tommy looks worried, glancing between Tubbo and Phil a few times before speaking again.

"I need stuff to help Tubbo," he finally says. Phil blinks. "Bandages. The stuff we got ready before. He's burnt. I think it's a second degree burn? You're better at this shit than I am, I wish you could do it."

"Tommy," Phil says slowly, because something isn't sitting right here. "Tubbo and you are infected."

"Yeah, probably," Tommy says, and takes a breath. "But Tubbo can't get sick. He's immune."

Phil takes a moment to process that. Tommy looks back at Tubbo.

Techno lets out an impressive string of swears.

They've obviously been listening in, because Wilbur asks "*what?*" and Dream's stepping forward to grip Phil's shoulder and steady him. It's reassuring. Tommy forges on after letting that simmer for half a minute.

"Tubbo's immune," he says, and he looks so much older than Phil knows he is. There's a weight on his shoulders that's impossible to fake, and even more impossible to carry. "Okay, so he was covered in spores, but he'll be fine. He was bitten before, a couple times, actually. He's always been fine. I-- I didn't see any of the shit on him," he turns, studying Tubbo for a second, "so maybe the fire burnt it all away when he lit it, but, uh." Tommy laughs, raising a hand to scratch at the back of his head and smile slightly. "I don't know."

"We're not taking any unnecessary risks," Dream says from beside Phil. Tommy nods.

"He's burnt pretty bad," Tommy says. "But I think I'm the only one who can apply first aid to him right now, since I've. Been exposed, I guess. And I'm not fucking immune." Tommy slams a fist into his thigh, snapping his fingers a couple times in rhythm. "Not. Fucking immune. So. I have what, a couple hours?"

"At most," Phil says weakly.

"Good." Tommy smiles at him, but it's not the normal smile, teeth bared. Now, he just looks sad. "I've got at least a couple hours, then, to bandage Tubbo up best I can for you guys. 'Cause he's gonna live." Time doesn't feel real. "He's gotta live. Gotta live."

Phil turns his gaze to Tubbo, who's still on the ground, but his eyes are open now, and staring at the group of them. He's clearly in pain, but through it he manages a quiet little smile, lips peeling and slightly bloody. Phil can't smile back. He just swallows, and forces himself to look at the burns peppering his skin. Thankfully, none of what he can see looks to be third degree at the moment. Just angry red skin and blisters, already popping up and white patches forming.

"George," Phil says. He feels the way their focus turns to him, but he needs to remember what to do now. "George, go get the medkit from where we stored it in the house across the plaza. Sapnap, you and Wilbur go get as much cool water as you can find. Preferably from the stream. We don't have time to sterilize it, so get it from the quick-running parts and we'll hope for the best." George is already gone by the time he finishes telling Sapnap and Wilbur what to do, and then they're off in a flash, bolting for the house and any water they can find. Across from him, Tommy wrings his hands.

It's like when they'd first met Wilbur. All his panic is suppressed into the back of his mind, coalescing into a tight little ball as Phil steps away from the shock and horror and forces himself to be analytical. He wonders if this suffocating pressure is what Techno feels all the time, then even forces that thought back and fixes Tommy in his gaze.

"I need you to look him over," Phil says. "Tell me what you see. We can go on from there. Tubbo, can you hear me?"

From Tubbo's place on the pavement, there's a faint nod. "Yes," he says, throat cracking. "Phil."

"I'm going to be right here," Phil promises, glancing around. "Tommy, we need to get him inside somewhere, away from the smoke. Pick a house, bring him in. We'll talk through the windows."

"I'm sorry," Tubbo says, even as Tommy's nodding and makes his way back over.
"Should've told you."

"Don't apologize," Phil says, because he's not angry. "It's in the past. We move on now."

"Right," Tubbo breathes, and then goes quiet as he tries (and fails) to keep from letting out pained noises as Tommy picks him up. It's clear he's hurting, and it's not difficult to know why. The burns are bad, down to his hip and having gone through the layers of clothing he'd been wearing.

"Damn," Dream says. "That's going to scar."

If he lives through it, are the words Phil doesn't speak. Instead, he follows Tommy at a distance as he makes his way inside, away from the flames. "He'll be okay," he says, because he has to pretend it's true for now. Techno is deathly silent as they watch Tommy struggle to get Tubbo inside, then disappears through walls. A moment later, he's waving an arm out of a broken window and Phil heads over, tromping unapologetically through someone's long-overgrown front garden.

Dream and Techno stay behind, talking in hushed voices, and that's fine by Phil. He instructs Tommy carefully from the window, mask firmly on, as they slowly take what they can of Tubbo's singed and burnt clothing off. It's really a miracle he's not entirely charred all over--Phil can't see the spores on him like he could earlier, either, but it's not a risk he's willing to take.

Tommy's hands are shaking as he works, but neither of them mention it. Nothing is said about it at all when George gets back with the medkit and Wilbur and Sapnap supply the water, leaving it just inside the window for Tommy to take. From there, Phil pulls on medical knowledge torn from old water-damaged books that had been scavenged from the library and tells him what to do. First is the water, bundles of bandages soaked and then carefully pressed into the burns, soothing the angry skin. Tommy's the gentlest Phil thinks he's ever seen him, but despite it Tubbo squirms and hisses in pain. Some of the skin is beyond saving, from what Tommy describes, so Phil tells him to cut it off. Tommy is clearly queasy, but does so and Tubbo seems to bear this part without pain, which makes sense.

"His nerves were too damaged," Phil explains through the shattered window, hiding his shaking fingers below the sill. "They were already dead. Keeping the skin on would just increase infection risk."

"Right," Tommy says, staring at the tube of antibacterial. "How much of this should I use?"

"As sparingly as possible," Phil explains, resting his forehead against the frame. "Spread it on the bandages first. Just a bit. And cover the biggest parts first. His torso, and shoulder. Some of the places where it's just red can be left uncovered. Those are probably just first degree. Like sunburns."

Behind him, he can hear flashes of conversation. Wilbur and Techno, sitting shoulder-to-shoulder on the sidewalk. George and Dream, heads bowed low together in a corner of the street. Sapnap takes it upon himself to clear the area up, tossing heads and limbs and parts of

the dead into the fire with enthusiasm. But even he tires after a bit, and when there's no more flesh to burn, he sits at George and Dream's sides and waits with the rest of them as Phil coaches Tommy through what he needs to do.

The pragmatic end comes too quickly. Tubbo is still conscious, but he's clearly tired and the bandages around his body make him look like a mummy. They're tight and clean-- Phil's happy with the job for now, and it'll have to do for a few days until they're sure he's clean of the spores.

Tommy is the unknown, here.

Phil had heard scraps of the conversation behind him, Sapnap explaining what gasoline does to a fire and how Tubbo's burns are from the initial explosion of vapor and liquid. How it's entirely possible the spores had been singed right off of him, dead and gone by the time Tommy reached him and pulled him from the flames. There's hope, Phil realizes. Minuscule hope.

Techno reminds them all not to assume with a scathing voice that makes them all quiet for the next ten minutes, at least.

"How long has it been?" Wilbur asks from his spot on the pavement, staring at the sky with unblinking eyes. It's gotten dark since the fire had started, smoke pouring into the sky and making the area feel like rain. The smell is horrific, but Phil's already desensitized.

"Probably about an hour and a half," Dream rationalizes, peering up at the sky as well to work out where the sun is. "At least."

"Tommy," Phil calls, from where he's still by the window. Tubbo and Tommy are inside, Tubbo with his head in Tommy's lap and both boys quiet as they sit there. Tubbo mostly from pain (both inside and out) and Tommy for... well. It's the quietest he'd ever heard them.
"How are you feeling?"

"Fine," Tommy says. His voice cracks. He clears his throat. "Thirsty. My ankle hurts. But not, uh. Sick, or anythin'." Phil sighs, watching as George comes over and hands over water through the window again. There's shuffling as Tommy reaches over to snag it, and then quiet again.

He coughs, and everyone freezes.

"M fine," he finally says after a tense moment of silence. "Enthusiastic drinking."

Tubbo lets out a choked laugh, and Phil feels his shoulders relax. He wants to hope. He wants to believe that what Sapnap had described earlier with the vapor and fire, that Tommy might've had the slightest chance of avoiding the spores and the sickness. His stomach roils when he thinks of Tommy living-- only to turn a few days later and dash all of their good spirits.

By the time night rolls around, everyone is still tense. The sky darkens until it's not just the smoke that makes it dim, and Wilbur ends up pressed against Phil's shoulder and dozing

quietly. Techno sits on the curb still, fingers twisting, sword by his side.

They can't stay like this, Phil realizes.

"We need to figure something out," he says quietly, breaking the silence that had been dominating for the past few hours. There hadn't been any movement or alarm from either Tubbo or Tommy, and when Phil had peeked in to check on them earlier they both had seemed to be asleep. Now, though, all heads turn to Phil who are awake, which is really only Techno and Dream. "For Tommy."

Wilbur shifts sleepily against his shoulder. "Bad used to make people quarantine," he says, surprising all of them with his voice. Dream's face is cast in shadow, and his expression is unreadable when Wilbur mentions the name. "Three days. And a complete scrub down."

"It worked," Dream says, voice quiet so he doesn't wake the two boys currently leaning against either of his shoulders. "The quarantine. If they were infected, it showed before the end of it."

"So we quarantine them for three days," Phil reasons. The fire casts flickering light over their faces, although it's small enough that it hardly lights the square anymore. The coals are still hot, and he can hardly feel the chill of the night. He's still shaking, though. Wilbur's warmth against his side helps calm the tremors. "Have them wash off. Wash off well, or as best as Tubbo can handle it with the burns."

"And after that?" Dream is still quiet, exhaustion heavy on all of their minds.

"After that, we... we're careful, but we let them back in the house and maybe go back to normal," Phil reasons.

Techno snorts, a shadow of a laugh. "Hah. *Normal*."

Phil takes a moment to glance over, clearly rolling his eyes. "You know what I mean," he tells him, then looks back over to Dream.

"It's a plan," he says, shrugging his shoulders oh-so-gently. Behind him, the light from the coals haloes his hair. Faintly, Phil remembers a museum and the paintings of men from ancient religions. Heroes, slumped against each other and beaten-down, battle worn. "Better than nothing."

Phil nods, and it's silently decided.

The days crawl by. It's agonizing. Like molasses, sticky and dark. The sky hangs onto the smoke and makes the days grey, spreading it out and cloud cover turning the days dreary and cold. For the middle of summer, it's a patch of gloom in all the brightness. They set up a

temporary shop in a house next to the one Tommy and Tubbo had taken shelter in, although most of their time is spent hanging around outside and bringing things to the boys when they ask. The whole ordeal leaves a sour taste in Phil's mouth-- it doesn't help that Dream, George, and Sapnap decide to leave on day two of the quarantine. Sapnap was clearly getting antsy, picking through the houses and rooms abandoned in town with Techno until Techno had enough of chattering and ran circles to avoid him. Wilbur and George, while on relatively good terms, usually devolve into arguments by the end of the day.

It's what they're doing when Dream approaches Phil that second day, voices echoing over the square.

"Phil?" He asks, and Phil glances up from where he'd been chipping away at a piece of wood. The carving wasn't anything substantial-- he was mostly whittling just to whittle, working out his anxiety on something tangible and real.

"What's up?" He asks, but it's mostly just courtesy. Dream's bag is packed and on his shoulder. Sapnap is finishing packing the rest of their things.

"It's nothing personal," Dream says, kicking a rock into the garden where it disappears into the overgrown grass. Somewhere inside, Tubbo laughs. It's a good sound.

"I'm not taking it as such," Phil reassures him. "You have important things to do."

It's quiet, but it's not uncomfortable. It's a silence born of comradery and shared trauma.

"You did good," Dream says after a few minutes of silence on their end. Across the way, Wilbur and George are still arguing even as Sapnap forces a backpack into George's hands.

"Thanks to you," Phil says, tipping his head. "Credit where credit is due."

"Sorry about the kids."

"It's..." It's not fine. It scared Phil so badly, and even now his mouth still tastes like iron from the adrenaline. He doesn't ever think he'll be able to recover from this, or at least, it'll take a long while for his insides to settle. "It'll be okay."

"You think they'll be alright? And the immunity thing-- you think it's the truth?" Dream sounds hesitant, if not a bit hopeful.

Phil thinks about that. Tommy's a horrible liar, and absolutely wouldn't have the acting skills to play something like that off. And Tubbo's always been reasonable about necessary things. That reasonality probably would've transferred over to his own death. "You know," Phil says, taking a breath. "Thinking back on it, there were things I should've noticed. Tubbo always..." He waves a hand in front of them both, not taking his eyes off the grain of wood in his hands. "He always threw himself in front of Tommy. Putting himself in danger like he knew he'd be okay. No hesitation. Like he'd done it a thousand times before. There was this one day-- the day we met Techno. He just bolted and threw himself right into the damn thing's mouth, came out without a scratch. Maybe I should've been paying more attention, you know? I still have no idea why they didn't just tell me."

"Maybe they didn't know how," Dream says, rocking back and forth on his heels. "But hey, ask them, not me."

"Of course, of course."

Silence falls again. Dream coughs.

"So," he says, awkwardness lilting his voice. "We'll probably head out, then. Our job's done."

Phil, the ever kind, cannot help himself. "Do you need anything for the road? We owe you, I'm sure."

"Nah, thanks. We're all set." Dream hitches a thumb over his shoulder toward his bag, shaking his head a bit. "You know what to do from here, right?"

"Give them more time. Keep an eye out for any bumps, burn what we can of the moss. Are you guys just going to keep doing the whole exterminating thing?"

"Definitely. You guys are gonna stay here?"

"Yeah. Why bother moving anymore if this place is relatively safe, y'know?" Phil thinks about leaving-- he thinks about it all the time. But they've created a home on their street, in their house, and now the idea seems like an impossible daydream to him.

"I know," Dream says, and the silence that follows it is deafening.

"Well--"

"Anyways--"

They both share a glance, then Phil lets out this breathy little laugh and he can hear Dream wheeze beside him. Phil holds out his hand and they shake, firm.

"Be safe, mate," he says, and the corners of Dream's eyes crinkle as he smiles. "And good luck."

"We'll see each other again," Dream says, lifting his hand in mock salute. "Good luck to you too."

Then he's gone. Phil watches as he heads over to Sapnap and George, who have been getting louder and louder. He doesn't stay to watch that goodbye, knowing Wilbur will just be more passionate and instead turns his attention back to the knife and wood, keeping an ear out for Tubbo and Tommy if they need him. With his attention elsewhere, Phil misses how Dream snags a faded L'Manberg flag from one of the porches, tucking it away into his bag.

Three days crawl by.

Tommy does not turn.

His eyes stay clear, and his skin is alive. He talks and jokes and eats and drinks, and slowly, Phil allows the walls around his heart to crack.

Tommy is okay. Tubbo will be, once the burns heal.

The burns are not as bad as they could be, all things considered. Every day of their quarantine, Phil coaches Tommy through changing his bandages and assessing the damage. Most of the burns are second degree, with a few first-degree patches around the edges. Phil watches from the window as Tommy changes the bandages and cleans the wounds out carefully. Infection on such a big wound would absolutely be deadly, so they spend the extra time to boil the water carefully and use a majority of their antibacterial cream while doing it.

“I wish you wouldn’t waste this stuff on me,” Tubbo says on the third day, unburnt arm over his eyes as Tommy gently wraps his cracked and bubbling fingers in bandages, washed from the previous go-around.

“We are not wasting *anything*,” Tommy insists, and Phil hums in agreement.

“But my stupid mistake means that we’re using all of it up,” Tubbo says quietly, grimacing as Tommy pulls the coverings a bit tighter. “Ow.”

“Well, your stupid mistake means that there’s not really any danger anymore,” Tommy points out, clipping the gauze into place carefully. Phil notes how gentle he is-- how his hands don’t tremble anymore as he cuts away the dead skin from the peeling parts of Tubbo’s torso, how he places gauze with such care. Resting on the window like he is, it’s easy to hide his smile in the crook of his elbow as Phil watches.

“It’s okay, Tubbo,” he calls out after a second. “Really. You’re worth it.”

“Damn right,” Tommy mumbles.

The third day passes, and Phil is sat at a table with Wilbur and Techno. Arguments come as naturally as bowel movements to their little group, and today is no exception.

“It’s been three days,” Wilbur reasons. “It should be fine.”

“But we don’t know that,” Techno insists, and despite his relaxed posture in his seat his shoulders are tense. Phil’s practically tearing at his hair. It’s been an *hour* of this back and forth. “They both could be infected and might pass it on to us without us knowing.”

“So what?” Wilbur’s fingers scuttle across the table. “If they were infected, they would’ve turned by now.”

“Unless they’re *both* immune, and the spores are just hanging out in their bloodstream and spit just itching to get it’s tiny feelers on us. It could kill us.”

“And? We’ve faced that risk before!”

“If we die, Wilbur, we leave them alone. I know you’re constantly on the edge of suicidal ideation, but come on. We don’t want to die.”

“Speak for yourself.”

“Wil.” It’s not something to joke about, and Phil makes sure that his tone is as cold as ice when he interrupts their arguing.

Wilbur tears at his hair with one hand. “He said it first!”

“Alright, look.” Phil knocks his fist down on the table, making them both jump. He feels bad for a split second, but then not particularly. “We have two choices. Leave them in quarantine forever, or let them out now. If we wait, what changes? Does the chance of us getting sick go down?”

Techno looks slightly humbled. “Not really, I don’t think. Maybe. Probably.” Phil raises an eyebrow. “Fine. I have no idea.”

“Then *fine*. We call it now. I don’t know about you two, but I miss the house. Being stuck is making me nervous. All of our shit is at that base-- anyone could sneak in while we’re here.” Phil flattens his hand against the wood, skin catching on a sliver before he can pull it away. “So let’s decide now. Wilbur?”

“I think we should cut it off now, and go home.” Home. The word sinks into Phil’s stomach and makes him feel ridiculously soft.

“Techno?”

“I think--”

A moment passes, and Phil gently prompts him. “You think?”

Techno’s eyebrows are drawn, face tense. After a second, he shakes his head. “....Phil, you decide.”

“What?” Phil tries to meet his gaze, but Techno just shifts his eyes up and away to the sky. He sounds breathless, frustrated.

“You decide. I just-- I can’t.”

Phil inhales, then breathes out low through his mouth. “Okay,” he says, tearing his eyes away from Techno’s face and to Wilbur’s. He just nods, agreeing. From there, he glances down, tracing the grain of the wood as both ideas swirl around. Why does everything lie on his shoulders? It’s a heavy, heavy weight, and even now, he can feel it pulling him down. As far as he’s sunk in the past few days, he’s yet to hit the bottom of this odd, churning ocean. His

finger catches on a dip in the wood, tearing at his nail, and yet Phil doesn't really register the pain. Blood bubbles up under his nail, against his cuticle, and he just tugs it away from the splinter and continues tracing invisible lines on the table.

"...Phil?" Wilbur asks softly, either a minute or four hours later. Time hasn't felt real these past few days. The sky is grey.

"Let's go home," Phil says after one last second of pondering over the question here.

Silence, and then a moment later: "Alright," Techno says, and so they do.

Going home is an ordeal. They don't tell Tommy or Tubbo until they've transported most of their things back to the house and cleaned up the square a little more. Techno had been going around and killing any errant spore-pods around the town, including one on the street to their house and the little creek across the way. Finally, when the town is clean enough for Wilbur's stomach to settle and Techno to stop pacing, Phil goes to see the other two. He hadn't said anything just yet-- Tommy has been antsy enough, and Phil figures that the news of them going home will just make it worse as they get ready to go. Obviously the two quarantined notice *something* going on, so Phil's not surprised to see Tubbo's knowing smile when he comes to find them that afternoon.

"What's up?" Tommy asks, sitting upside-down on the couch. Tubbo is laid up painfully on the other side of it, still looking like a mummy. His burns have been lucky, though, and been healing nicely. Phil watches them for a minute, then nods toward the door.

"Time to go," he says, and both boys break into twin grins.

The trek back to the house is long and arduous, Tubbo limping beside Tommy and reassuring them every step of the way that he's fine. Phil hangs back, leaving Tommy to the task, but both of them are injured. Tommy's ankle, which had been deduced to be a sprain, makes him limp, and Tubbo's hip and leg being burnt makes walking painful. Techno suggests hotwiring a car, but none of the ones around seem to have enough gas or be in good enough shape. Finally, Tommy and Tubbo just start walking on their own, arms around each other's shoulders and grinning widely despite the pain and annoyance of it all.

They make a pit stop in the creek, where Tommy splashes around and rinses four days worth of grime and blood and sweat off, and hopefully any errant spores that might be lingering. Tubbo does the same, albeit much more carefully and slowly. The bandages stay on, and he just scrubs the healthy areas of his body with a rag and bucket provided from Wilbur. It's easy-- it's fun. The sun is back out again, the grey skies from days prior clearing up and clouds receding into the horizon. Water droplets look like crystals in Tommy's hair, on Tubbo's eyelashes, and they're smiling and joking and even Techno relaxes here, on the edge of a stream during this bright sunny day. Phil feels calm. He feels... good. Everyone's safe,

everyone is happy. Wilbur is smiling wide, shoulder pressed to Phil's, and all of the anxiety and adrenaline of the past week melts away, washed down the stream with the grime that the two boys wash off.

The future doesn't seem as daunting as it once did.

There are conversations to be had, of course. The painful ones he draws out of Tubbo and Tommy in turn, the ones that lead to quiet tears and confessions and comfort. They're like thorns, pressed into each other's sides and pricking them with every move they make, pushed deeper and deeper. Phil knows he has to address these wounds before they get infected-- it's basic medical knowledge. When someone gets a splinter, you pull what you can out. When you prick yourself on a rosebush, you cradle the wound close and tend to it. These wounds are no different.

Phil prompts them with Tubbo and Tommy, because their wounds are the clearest and the most physical. Tubbo's struggling, bandages still covering most of his torso and jaw stiff with scar tissue. Tommy's ankle heals up in just a few days of rest, but it's clear how clingy they are to the other. Neither leaves a room without the other. Tommy's attentive, to a point where Tubbo has to snap at him to get space. Tubbo's otherwise quiet. Too quiet.

So Phil commandeers the conversation one night, after they've eaten their dinner and cleaned up. It had been an easy day-- lounging around the house, nothing to do but sit and fill the time. Phil hadn't even changed out of his pajamas.

"--when I hit him over the head with the big fat side," Wilbur explains, tipping his guitar to show the slight dent in the wood. "It's called the body. But, I hit him with it, because I didn't have anything else."

"You should be more careful," Techno says, sitting in beside Wilbur and scribbling in his notebook on occasion. He looks like he's not listening-- Phil knows better than to take anything Techno does at face value. "You've only got one guitar."

"Right, but who's going to raid a guitar store? What's helpful there? I bet there are tons of guitars out there," Wilbur says, and Tubbo nods in agreement. Tommy's pressed up against Tubbo's side, eyes half shut and clearly not listening to the conversation. Phil's learned to take everything Tommy does at face value.

"That's irrational. The wood might've warped, or rotted," Techno says, but Tubbo cuts in.

"Wilbur's probably right," he says. "If they're inside, they've been protected from the elements."

"See?" Wilbur says, extending a hand and patting Tubbo's good shoulder. "Tubbo knows what's up."

"You're ridiculous," Techno mutters, leaning his forehead into his palm, and Phil sees his opening as the conversation lulls.

"Hey," he says, from where he's sitting across the room in his chair. His chair is very cozy, and it is his-- Tommy calls it a grandma-chair, what with how it's a faded floral armchair with dirty lace around the bottom edges, but Phil likes it. It's stayed comfortable, no matter how many times he's sat (or slept) in it. All eyes are on him, now, and his grandma-chair. "Can I ask you something, Tubbo?"

"Sure," Tubbo says, all content smiles and sincere looks. Beside him, Tommy stirs a bit, eyes opening a slit to watch Phil. "What is it?"

"It's a serious question," Phil says, and Tubbo's face squishes up a bit. Phil figures he knows what's coming-- it's been a week since they'd returned from town, and yet hadn't had this conversation yet. "Were you ever going to say anything about being immune?"

Silence settles over the room. Suddenly, everyone is paying attention. Tommy's eyes are wide open.

Tubbo licks his lips. "Well," he says quietly, then shrugs. Then winces. "Well. Maybe? It's not like I was purposefully keeping it from you guys. It's just not... something I've thought about, lately."

"Not even when we, I don't know, were discussing strategic plans before taking on a massive hoard?" Techno pipes up.

"Shut up," Tommy snaps, sitting up and shuffling the blanket he'd been curled under as he does so. "It was Tubbo's decision to tell you or not, prick. You don't get to demand shit."

"What, so you were the only one who deserved to know about such a huge advantage?" Techno's glaring, and Phil did not mean for this conversation to turn sour. At all. "If we had known, we could've planned better. Maybe you two wouldn't have gotten hurt at all."

"It was Tubbo's decision," Tommy snaps back, and he's leaning into the argument, over Tubbo's lap. Tubbo, who is suddenly looking very uncomfortable. "I wasn't going to fucking snitch on him just because it would've been *helpful*. That's not how this works!"

"You probably should've told us," Wilbur cuts in, guitar now by his feet and out of the line of fire. "Techno's half-right."

"I'm right," Techno insists. "Imagine what we could've avoided if we knew."

"Oh, shut up Techno. Everything turned out fine, yeah? Who gives a shit anymore--"

"Tommy, for a good five minutes, I was preparing myself to kill you two." Techno's voice is like ice settling over the room, and Phil can feel the chill in his bones. He doesn't want to think about it-- about the crossbow that Techno had held and the bolts he'd let sit on his hip, Tommy and Tubbo's names carved into them. No one speaks for a moment, the weight of what happened hanging over them like Damocles' sword.

"I'm sorry," Tubbo says, breaking the silence. The hair holding the sword snaps.

Phil takes this moment to swoop in. "What's done is done," he says quietly, watching all of them turn to look at him again. Tommy's bottom lip is trembling. Techno is stoic. Wilbur looks uncomfortable. "Tubbo didn't have an obligation to tell us, which I understand. We can't go back and change what might've been said, or told. We can't go back and erase what did happen. The only place to go is forward."

"Earthly wisdom," Wilbur quips, voice dripping with sarcasm. Tommy reaches out and punches him in the shoulder.

Techno sinks back into the cushions of the couch, and his face is hidden by his fingers. "Never make me think about making that choice again," he says, and it's the closest thing to pleading Phil's ever heard from him. "...please."

"I'm sorry," Tubbo says again, and then he's moving, clambering over Wilbur gently and reaching out to take one of Techno's hands in his own. He holds it for a second, bandaged fingers holding trembling ones. Tommy sits in the mussed pile of blankets, watching, looking at Wilbur. Then slowly, he crawls over too, until the four of them are pressed together on the couch (careful of Tubbo's burns) and there is negligible space left for Phil. He joins anyways, squishing himself into the pile and wrapping them up with what he can reach with his arms. They're all so freakishly tall, it's ridiculous. Except for Tubbo. Despite it, they seem to fit comfortably there, together. Wilbur's the first to start laughing when Tommy slowly slips off the couch, scrabbling to hold onto his place, and then all five of them are giggling and snickering to each other in the dim light of the room, sun setting just across the street.

Phil thinks these are the first steps to healing.

Someone knocks on their door.

It's been a few months since the fire in their town, since Dream, George, and Sapnap took their leave and didn't look back. It's been a quiet few months as they adjust to not having to constantly be on their toes. It's been a slow process, recovery-- but it's fine. It's just a matter of getting through it. They all have the mental and physical scars left from the ordeal months ago-- Tubbo's scarred and will clearly never have the same range of motion as before, but he's as chipper as ever. Phil is just glad for the tiny section on burn recovery and care in the medical textbook Techno had found and grabbed in the library. They all stick together like glue in the weeks after the fire, paranoia making them clingy and constantly exhausted. But slowly, things get better. Some routines will never truly be the same, of course. Phil knows their lives will never be "normal" again and that their situation is the new normal, in a way, so he tries to take it in stride and make the most out of it. Most of their days are spent working to better the systems they have, or gathering supplies for the coming winter or just fucking around with each other to pass the time.

However, someone just knocked on their door.

They're all seated frozen in the living room, Phil having been a breath away from suggesting lunch when the knock had come. They didn't often use the front door down the hall, much preferring the back one to it in fact, so when Phil cautiously approaches it he realizes it's still locked. Gently, he twists the bolt back and keeps his hand on his axe, having pulled it from the corner of the living room as he'd made his way out. Techno's behind him, he knows that, and behind Techno is Wilbur and he's sure Tommy and Tubbo are peering out of the living room doorway as well. He turns the deadbolt and opens the door.

The girl on their porch is ragged, a backpack on her shoulders and hair draping long and messy and patchy in front of her face. She's got smudges under her eyes and messy makeup, like she'd tried a few days ago and forgotten it was on. How she even found makeup is beyond Phil-- her fingers are clutching the backpack straps on her shoulders hard enough that they're white, and her weapon is a bow that's slung over it, not even in her hand as she waits for the door to open. She's small-- smaller than Phil, probably smaller than Tubbo, but there's a fire in her eyes as she looks at them all, tipping her head to see past Phil and note the practical army he's got behind him.

"I saw the flags," she says, the first to break the silence. "Is this L'Manberg?"

Niki is wonderful.

Phil likes her immediately. She's kind, she's helpful, she's sweet to Tubbo and Wilbur and vicious to Tommy and Techno. He invites her in for dinner that first night, letting her stay where she likes-- she chooses an upstairs bedroom, Techno volunteering to sleep downstairs with a slightly-starstruck looking Wilbur. She tells them some of her story, and it goes like this:

Once upon a time, a young girl found herself in the middle of an apocalypse. Her solution was to find as many people as she could to try and make herself feel safe. She found a compound, and lived there for a while, but things went wrong and she had to run. This cycle repeated itself a few more times before large crowds started to make her panic and she finally found a small house in the woods to call her own. It was idyllic at first, but her own ignorance and an ember caused a small fire, which led to the place burning down. Upset and alone, she traveled on. The first town she came to she squatted in, avoiding the center like the plague, and two weeks later a man with a green hoodie and a mask had found her with his companions and told her about a safe place she might like called L'Manberg.

Phil curses Dream out in his mind for making the silly name stick.

While Niki is lovely, she tells them the next morning that she's not really used to living with so many people anymore. And Phil doesn't want to kick her out, but the house is getting *very* crowded.

So they go across the street and tear down the boards they'd put up the summer before, revealing a home inside for a new friend. They patch up what they can, spending a whole afternoon working together and fixing the holes in the floorboards, sweeping the kitchen, dusting down the whole place with masks firmly on. The house isn't small, but it's not the largest on the street either, and Niki settles in damn near perfectly. As the week passes, she spends her time with them outside; Tubbo helping her set up a garden with some of their seeds, Tommy fencing with her in the street, Techno bringing over blankets that Phil has hoarded, and Wilbur often going over in the evening, the soft sounds of guitar music drifting through their open windows as the sun sets. Phil allows her access to his inventory notebook-- what's theirs is hers now, he explains, and with delight she rummages through his fabric stores and pulls out a soft blue sheet.

"I've missed skirts and dresses," she admits to him, holding it up to her waist and eyeing the length. "Do you have a needle and thread?"

He does, and she takes some with a smile.

A week later, Phil's sitting on the porch with a mug of tea, fingers cupped around it as he quietly listens to the sounds of music floating across the street. Techno's inside, Tommy and Tubbo having retreated to their bedroom a while ago, and Wilbur has yet to return from Niki's porch. He can see them if he tries, the moon giving off just enough light for him to see the outline of two shapes in the dark, sitting close as Wil plays. It's a pretty night, and Phil wonders if he's getting too used to this feeling of peace.

It's like someone has opened a floodgate. This turns out to be true, as a week later, two young men arrive with the name of their silly little establishment on their lips and Dream's recommendation in hand. Eret and Fundy are energetic and kind, and mesh easily with Niki. Their house quickly becomes a second home. Another duo arrives, one singing loudly and attracting everyone's attention as they trudge up the center of the street. That week, late one night, the El Rapids house is claimed and Karl and Quackity settle in.

As fall trudges onwards and winter starts to sink its claws into the world, people show up from every direction knowing about L'Manberg. They manage to fix up another house before the first snowfall, which is good, because during the winter four more boys show up on their doorstep. Thankfully, everyone pulls their weight. Winter is a concern and the snow is terrible, but there are three houses to bounce between and the cabin fever is not nearly as bad as it was last year. Christmas is celebrated again-- there's more feast this year, less presents, as Phil's not quite sure what to get their new companions.

Niki is sweet and kind. Eret is smart and has an eye for the aesthetic. Fundy is musical and gets along with Wilbur like a house on fire-- he's adopted into the family quite literally, with Wilbur proclaiming them father and son before long. Ponk, Punz, HBomb, and Purpled show up as a hesitantly-allied group, apparently brought together by Dream and had stuck together in order to reach L'Manberg safely. They bring news of more fires, less zombies, and more people. Ponk and Punz are flighty-- they're gone most days, back some, and spend time in the third house that Niki starts to refer to as the Inn due to how they rotate in and out. Hbomb and Purpled are more constant faces, Purpled if only due to his age. He and Tommy and

Tubbo cause all sorts of mischief together, and Phil stubbornly ignores any prods and teases thrown his way about his habit of adopting traumatized teenagers.

The winter is lively, and despite food stores running low near the end, Phil finds that they traverse it without much difficulty.

Spring comes. The snow melts. More flags are thrown around their base of operations, and a new garden is started down the road. Two more people arrive, Jack and Ranboo, both able to make Phil laugh uproariously and create their home. L'Manberg, which had been a joke at first, turns into something very real and very precious, even if it's only a flag and a name that unites them. What they have is a group effort-- more than that, it's a community.

It's a warm spring day when there's a knock on their door, and Phil finally gets the chance to tend to Wilbur's thorns.

This isn't uncommon, now that more people have accumulated in their tiny town. Phil's hesitant to call it a compound-- there's no one in charge, after all. They just work together, with the common goal of survival. They all have their own things, their own goals, their own friendships. It's not a compound, he'll say again and again. It's a community.

So knocks on the door aren't uncommon. Usually, it's followed by someone opening the door and either questions or shouting, of the happy variety. Sometimes it'll be Niki, asking for Wilbur, or Fundy looking for a spare screwdriver and Tubbo's counsel.

This time, however, Phil opens the door to completely new faces.

"Hi!" A young woman chirps, tangled French braids down either of her shoulders, hands clasping the battered blue fabric of a backpack. Behind her are two young men, both dark-haired. "The girl told us to talk to you about L'Manberg?"

Phil takes them all in for a moment. The girl looks sincere, but the two guys behind her look hesitant, if not a little on-guard. It makes sense. There are more than a few people in their community by now, and the numbers can seem intimidating. "Right," he says, startling himself out of his reverie. "Of course. What do you want to know?"

"I met Dream a few weeks ago," The girl explains. "Name's Puffy. He told us about this place!"

"Well, if he told you, then you can't be terrible," Phil reasons lightly. "Come in, we can talk."

They come in.

"Who's that?" Wilbur calls from the living room. He and Phil are the only ones in the house currently-- Tubbo and Tommy have run off somewhere, likely to go find Ranboo, and Techno

has also run off. Likely by himself. Phil, half-turned away, misses how the two young men stiffen in alarm.

“People,” Phil calls back, urging them in and heading for the living room. “This way. Sorry about the mess. It’s-- well, I hoard.”

“No problem!” Puffy seems endlessly exuberant, energy spilling from her every word. “We’re used to mess. It’s a nice place you’ve got, really.”

“We’ve been here just over two years,” Phil explains, stepping into the living room and giving Wilbur a wave, which he returns. Puffy turns the corner, and then the other man. Phil turns, just as the last of the trio enters the room.

Wilbur glances up and freezes.

For a moment, Phil is thrown back to a similar day in the summer, when he’d invited a trio into the home and offered them food and shelter. When Wilbur had frozen in fear and surprise, then closed off immediately. When everything had been less stable than before, and this sense of home and safety had been precariously balanced on the edge of a sharp knife. Nostalgia hits him like a wave, crashing over his head and drowning him in the sensation of salt and cilantro.

Then it breaks, as Wilbur throws himself off the couch and towards their new visitor, murder in his eyes.

“Get out,” he says, voice sharp and angry and dangerous. “Get out, now.”

“Jesus christ--”

“Wilbur!”

Their surprised remarks hardly get far, because Wilbur’s moving fast and none of them are prepared. Even the other man, whose eyes go wide and he ducks, but it’s not enough. Wilbur’s fist catches him in the face just as Phil’s feet reaches them, and he’s tugging Wilbur away and off and down. In his arms, Wilbur struggles, shouting unintelligibly as Puffy shuffles around them to grab her friend and tug him back. In the periphery, Phil can see blood dripping from his nose and onto the carpet-- shit, it’ll stain-- before someone brings cloth to his face.

“Fuck you!” Wilbur shouts, and Phil notes with mild concern that he’s shaking. His knuckles are bloody. “Fuck you, Schlatt!”

Ah.

Like puzzle pieces, everything clicks into place. Wilbur’s anger, Schlatt’s bloody nose, the confused and guilty glances Puffy and the other man are sending Phil’s way. He sighs, wrestling with Wilbur to get him back a little bit.

“Wilbur,” he says, then again. “Wil! Hey! Look at me!”

Wilbur's eyes meet his gaze, furious and wet. "He can't ruin this," Wilbur says, and his voice cracks slightly. "This. Us. I won't let him. Get him out of here."

"Wilbur--" Schlatt nudges Puffy away, but Wilbur hardly lets him start.

"Shut up! Don't fucking talk to me, you-- you bastard. You piece of shit. Get out of my fucking house. Away from us." No one moves, and so Wilbur struggles against Phil's hand again. "Go!"

"Schlatt?" Puffy's voice is hesitant, but she's gentle about it. "Is this--?"

"Yeah," Schlatt says, and his voice is muffled terribly from the cloth currently held over his nose, stanching the bleeding carefully. "Hi, Wilbur."

"Get out." Wilbur's voice is like ice, and Phil can't find it in him to be angry about his hostility.

"Just let me explain," Schlatt pleads, but again, Wilbur shakes his head.

"Get. Out."

Phil cuts in before Schlatt can respond again, or even open his mouth. "Look, you should go."

"It's alright. We get it," the other guy says, reaching out and putting a hand on Puffy's shoulder, who's in turn holding Schlatt.

"Find Niki-- she's probably the girl you spoke to earlier. She can help set you up for the night, and we can talk again in the morning," Phil says over his shoulder, and feels Wilbur's weight press up against his hands when he says it.

"No, I want him out. Out of the fucking country, even," Wilbur snarls, and Phil turns back to keep him away, exhaling hard.

"Wilbur, for fuck's sake--"

Wilbur hardly lets him get it out. "You don't fucking get to talk, you-- you lied to me, you lied to me and left me behind--" His voice rises in both pitch and volume as he speaks, animosity oozing from every pore.

"Go," Phil insists, and Puffy is already ushering Schlatt out the door. "Thanks for stopping by."

"See you!" She calls, still sounding ever-cheery, but it's clearly layered over stress and worry and confusion. Wilbur is still shaking, even as the three disappear and the door shuts. Phil immediately turns, but Wilbur's talking before he can even get a word in to try and diffuse this.

"Kick him out, Phil," Wilbur says, and his voice is still dangerous. He's on the verge of tears, clearly, shoulders pressed up against Phil's hands from when he'd been keeping him back.

His whole body seems to be running hot. “Phil, he *can’t stay*. Last time, he-- I can’t let it happen again. He can’t ruin this. I won’t fucking let him.”

“Wilbur. You need to stop, and look at me.” Phil’s fingers dig into Wilbur’s shoulders, the soft fabric of his sweater there. He gently turns him, trying to meet his eyes. Wilbur takes a second, but he eventually looks, brown eyes meeting Phil’s blue. “Deep breaths, mate. In, out.”

Wilbur breathes in, and out. His chest heaves. His knuckles are bloody. There’s an anger and upset in him that Phil is not finding easy to calm down.

“He can’t tear this apart,” Wilbur says again, the same sentiment coming to light over and over in his panic. Phil breathes with him, guiding him down and out of his high.

“L’Manberg.”

“He won’t,” Phil reassures, squeezing his shoulders. “Wilbur. It’s alright. We’re safe here. If you want him gone, well. We can make that happen.”

“I want him *dead*.”

“Well-- less likely, but maybe you can get Techno to do it.” It’s mostly a joke, since Phil knows Techno isn’t too enthusiastic about killing alive people, but Wilbur’s eyes flash dangerously at it. “Hey. No. Stop it.” Phil squeezes him again, harder. Bringing him back to earth. “Remember what I said before? What’s done is done. We can only go forward.”

“He ruined *everything*, Phil,” Wilbur whispers, and then he’s crumpling inwards and forwards and into Phil’s chest and arms. It would be less awkward if Wilbur wasn’t a giant, but he is, and Phil is left hugging him awkwardly as he’s bent over and clearly fighting back tears.

It takes a while, but eventually, Wilbur calms down enough for Phil to move them both to the sofa and look at his hand. It’s mostly Schlatt’s blood, but his knuckles are likely going to bruise as Phil wipes the gore away. They’re both quiet, sitting there, until Wilbur opens his mouth with: “I think I’m going to be sick,” and promptly turns and gags into their designated wastebasket for the living room.

“Shit,” Phil says, and hurries to find something more substantial for Wilbur to heave into. There’s not a lot coming up-- breakfast had been skipped this morning in favor of just tea, but it’s enough for Phil to be sympathetic. He sits, rubbing gently at Wilbur’s back as he gets it out of his system, and eventually it slows and halts.

“I’m sorry,” Wilbur mutters, and Phil presses a cool water bottle into his hand.

“Don’t be, mate,” Phil tells him, because it’s really okay. They’ve all had their bad days-- the ones where Tommy and Tubbo stay in bed all day, where Phil can’t hold anything from how bad he shakes, the days when Techno speaks to no one. They’ve all woken up in cold sweats, or been unable to sleep for hours. It’s just a part of life now, even without something to trigger it. “It’s alright.”

"I never thought I'd see him again," Wilbur admits, sipping from the water bottle carefully and then wiping at his mouth with the back of his hand. "I thought he'd die or some shit. Not... not show up here." He takes another sip, swishes, and then spits. Phil purposefully does not grimace.

"Life surprises us like that," Phil tells him, and Wilbur clenches the water bottle tightly.

"He can't stay," he insists, and the anger from before has dissipated. Now, Wilbur just looks... sad.

"I want to talk to his friend," Phil says, hesitant, but sure in his intentions here. It hadn't been just Schlatt-- he'd come with people. People who seemed nice. "Is that alright?"

Wilbur flaps his free hand in the air. "As long as he leaves."

Phil sighs, blowing air out staring across the room at the wall. Wilbur, while the anger is gone, is still clearly upset, and it hangs in the air long after they've mutually decided to stop talking about it. That night is tense, and everybody catches on to the mood-- no one argues over the choice of dinner (which Techno makes, and is Wilbur's favorite) and Tommy and Tubbo are strangely helpful and quiet for the most part. No one's dancing around Wilbur or tiptoeing-- there is always snippy banter when it comes to these boys, but the night is subdued compared to what their normal spring nights would look like. Wilbur retires early, but that night, lying in his own bed, Phil can hear the sounds of pacing in the living room, footsteps tracking the same spots over and over and over.

The next day, Puffy and Schlatt and Connor (the other man, who Phil hadn't even had time to catch the name of) reappear mid-morning at Phil's door. He lets Puffy and Connor in, but makes Schlatt wait at the door.

"I want to have him in here as well," Phil says to Puffy, and then turns to Wilbur. "But you need to promise not to get physical."

"No promises," Wilbur says, darkened eyes studying an uncomfortable-looking Puffy and a shifty Connor.

Phil sighs. "Seriously, Wil. Hands to yourself. I know this isn't ideal, but let's hear what has to be said, okay?"

"...fine."

It's agreed upon, and Schlatt's once again in the living room. This time, Wilbur stays put on the couch, and Schlatt ends up leaning against the opposite wall. Whether it's conscious or not, they've both sought out the furthest spot in the room from the other. Wilbur leans away. Schlatt is stoic, mouth drawn into a hard line for the duration of Phil and Puffy's talk.

Their story goes like many do, these days. They'd met up not long after Schlatt had been thrown out of the compound, after Wilbur had punched him and left him behind. Connor and Schlatt had first, and Puffy came last. They'd traveled together for a while, staying in houses and bases and the occasional compound. Schlatt hadn't attempted any more coups. Puffy and

Connor knew about his history-- Connor had been a part of it, after all, but according to all three of them, things are different now.

“We just want to stop running,” Puffy says quietly.

Phil turns to look at Wilbur, whose face is the same as it was when Schlatt first reappeared into view.

“I promise we won’t cause trouble,” Puffy says again, and turns to look at Connor and Schlatt. “They do too.”

“Swear it,” Connor says, saluting. Schlatt heaves a sigh, shoulders shifting, and then nods.

“I swear too,” he says, and he’s looking at Wilbur. “Things have changed for all of us.”

“So you’re not a homicidal maniac anymore?” Wilbur asks, and it’s the first thing he’s said since they’d started talking. Schlatt winces. Phil reaches out, whapping his knee gently.

“You wanna know something, Wilbur?” Schlatt asks, and he doesn’t sound angry. Just... upset. The same kind of upset that Wilbur had been last night, and still is. “We came across a couple people a few months back. Guess who?”

Silence. Puffy and Connor are quiet as well. After a moment, Schlatt continues.

“Bad. Bad and his little group of badlanders. He’s gotten a few new faces, did you know? Well, they left the compound and started travelin’.”

“No shit,” Wilbur says, and Schlatt snorts.

“Yeah shit. And guess what? Bad didn’t punch me in the fucking face. He actually talked to me. And we both apologized. And now we’re on... well, I wouldn’t say good terms, but I’d help him if he asked and he’d help me.”

“Bullshit.”

“Not bullshit,” Puffy says. “Bad’s a good friend of ours. It’s how we met Dream and heard about this place.”

Phil hums, low, and puts a hand on Wilbur’s shoulder to steady him, ground him. He watches as Wilbur stares at Schlatt, then Puffy, then his hands again.

“They were thinkin’ about following us here,” Schlatt says, and his voice is the most gentle Phil has heard so far. “Look. You might not be able to forgive me. That’s fine. But I swear to you-- on everything I have, everything I’ve been able to do and make up for recently-- that I’m not gonna do anything. I just wanna.... Relax. I just want to be able to sleep, man.”

Wilbur is silent, staring at his clenched hands. Then, “I can’t forgive you.”

“I know.”

"I won't forgive you," he insists, looking up from his hands to the man leaning against the wall across from him. They stare at each other, unreadable.

Schlatt nods, acquiesces. "That's fine."

Wilbur raises a hand, points. "If anything-- and I mean anything-- sounds weird, or starts to be odd, and it's connected to you, I'm kicking you out first," he says, and Schlatt snorts a laugh, holding up both hands in mock surrender. Wilbur's face contorts into a mock snarl, but it's smoothed over a second later when Phil reaches out and pats his hands.

"Sounds fair to me," Schlatt says, and they're still staring at each other.

"Fine," Wilbur snaps.

"Fine," Schlatt drawls.

No one moves for a moment.

Wilbur gets up, sharp edges and jerky movements that would've sliced anyone other than Phil. He leaves without another word, the sound of footsteps on stairs, and then a door shutting. If Phil had to guess, he'd say that Wilbur had retreated to Techno's room (a not uncommon occurrence).

"Well," Puffy says, breathless and clapping her hands together. "That was fun!"

Phil entertains the three of them for a bit longer before sending them off to get settled-- Puffy is a delight, as he had originally thought, and Connor proves to be a funny and quick-witted comedian. Schlatt is lowkey-- but Phil doesn't push. The situation has been mostly dealt with, and that's fine by him. He sends them off with some spare blankets he keeps in the hallway closet and a wave, and then shuts the door firmly behind them.

He takes a moment by himself there, pressed up against the wood of the front door, and breathes.

That was a ride and fucking half, he thinks to himself.

Things settle.

Tension is high for a while after Schlatt's arrival, but in the weeks following, spring turns to summer and everyone... settles. The badlanders that Schlatt mentioned show up, and they are a delight. Phil is ecstatic when one of them-- another tall guy named Sam-- explains how he's gotten generators to work, and how he'd love to hook one of the houses up to one. Niki takes him up on the offer first, Phil cursing in his head at the missed opportunity, but there's always

time for more. Bad is kind and sweet and Phil likes him immediately-- his handshake is firm and strong.

"I've given up on running things, really," he explains, and Phil purposefully does not look at the scars creeping up out of his t-shirt collar. "But you've got a nice thing going here."

"Oh, I don't run it," Phil explains, "I'm just the oldest."

Tubbo and Bad talk about their shared burn scars-- Schlatt and Wilbur avoid each other at all costs. Techno chases Quackity down the street with a fencing sword and monotone drawl that leaves everyone in his wake shaken, and Tommy enlists Ranboo to vandalize everything they can when Skeppy gifts them a backpack full of spray paint. Niki figures out how to bake bread better than Phil ever could on an open fire. Their garden overflows with vegetables and food, and Ponk and Punz come back to L'Manberg with meat often on their belts. It's.... It's a good existence. It's safe, for the most part. It's loud. It's full of company and love, and after four years alone and then only the others with him, light and evidence of others are welcome sights to see coming home at night after a long walk through their town. Zombies are gone from the area, other than the occasional staggering, deceased, harmless infected. Phil doesn't think he'll ever stop carrying weapons on his body, but for now, his shoulders are relaxed and nothing really hurts any more.

They've branched out, he realizes one night, watching Tommy shriek and race down the center of the street against Tubbo, Techno, Sam, Fundy, Karl, and Ranboo. It's a footrace that Ranboo loses spectacularly in a faceplant to the pavement, and Fundy surprisingly takes the win by a smidge. They've built a community here, Phil knows, and it's good to see. No matter how bittersweet he feels sometimes, remembering the quiet days when it was just the five of them and their little house in the middle of the world. There are some things that stay.

No matter what, Phil always dishes out five servings of dinner. No matter what, Tommy and Tubbo sleep in their bedroom upstairs and Techno finally shows Phil his novel, pen clicking anxiously in his thumb as he flips through worn pages, Wilbur playing them songs that are more hopeful, less sad. No matter what, they all end up in their home at night laughing and joking and pressing each other's buttons with a kind of delight that only years of friendship can reveal. Phil's happy, he thinks, and that's alright for now.

Somewhere kilometers away, a young man with a mask unfolds a faded and crumpled flag, ash raining down from the sky.

A hand slaps down on his shoulder. "Time to go back?"

"Yeah," he says, rubbing the worn fabric between his fingers. "I think so."

ta da!

it's done! many words about zombies. actually, not a lot of words about zombies. it's a lot of words about people. i think the thing that hits me the most about these kind of aus is how lawless and brutal everything is-- when in reality, people tend to come together during hard times. i hope i got across the sensation of hope that was meant to be the point of this story; especially these days, during a literal plague, when people come together to do great things despite divides.

if you're interested, you should click on the series and check out the first chapter of next fic i posted today! [the aftermath is secondary](#) will follow tommy and tubbo in the early days :) go check it out! and keep an eye out for a sequel :) no spoilers but.....

kudos and comments are greatly appreciated, as always. thanks for reading!

HEY EVERYONE!!!! teahound make a [LOVELY PIECE OF FANART!!!!](#) it's my first ever piece of art for this fic (not including urs crow i love you) BUT EVERYONE SHOULD GO LOOK AT IT AND CHECK IT OUT IT'S SO COOL!!!!!!!

and another, 4/28/21, by the amazing tam tamatojam!!!!!! [CLICK HERE!!!!](#)

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i also now have a [discord](#) if you're interested!

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